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PHEMIE KELLER.

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PHEMIE KELLER.

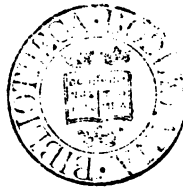
A Novel.

By F. G. TRAFFORD,

AUTHOR OF "GEORGE GEITH," "CITY AND SUBURB," "MAXWELL DREWITT,"
"TOO MUCH ALONE," "WORLD AND THE CHURCH," "RACE FOR WEALTH."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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CONTENTS.



CHAP.	PAGE
I.—SORROWFUL TIDINGS	1
II.—WIDOWED	24
III.—THE LETTER	35
IV.—MEETING.	62
V.—RECONCILED.	96
VI.—THE LAST ENEMY	119
VII.—OLD FRIENDS AND OLD PLACES	141
VIII.—PHEMIE'S JOURNEY	175
IX.—THE RETURN	201
X.—BASIL'S COMFORTER	217
XI.—CONFESSIONS	230
XII.—PHEMIE EXPRESSES HER OPINIONS.	265
XIII.—CONCLUSION	287



PHEMIE KELLER.

CHAPTER I.

SORROWFUL TIDINGS.

It was drawing towards the close of the year 1856 (there may be some among my readers who can recollect what a dull, foggy, cheerless ending that year had), when one morning the post to Marshlands brought with it an Indian letter for Captain Stondon.

4 The post often brought Indian letters there—long letters (for though the writer addressed his epistles to Captain Stondon, he knew they would be read by Phemie), full of descriptions of the country, of his occupations, of his prospects, of his hopes.

Nearly three years had elapsed since Basil's departure, but time made no difference in the

regularity of his correspondence. Let him be busy or the reverse, the young man still found leisure to despatch his budget of news. Perhaps he felt that on those letters Phemie lived; that her existence was only rendered supportable by the excitement of waiting for his missives, and hearing them read aloud; that she loved the sight of his handwriting as she had once loved the sight of himself; that she counted up the days as they came and went—counted how long it was since the arrival of his last letter, how long it would be before the advent of his next. The time had passed with her somehow; she was no longer the girl Phemie; she had changed from the young wife, from the beautiful gracious hostess, to a quiet, undemonstrative woman, who tried with all her heart and all her soul to do her duty.

It had come to that—for lack of explanation—even because of her husband's excessive tenderness and consideration, she found she could only give him duty, never love. Her lover was gone from her—she had driven him away! Her

lover, who had not married Miss Derno after all, who had loved her, her only—Phemie Stondon, who now sat with her hands folded, and her untasted breakfast before her, waiting for the news which Captain Stondon appeared unusually loth to communicate.

When he went away she vowed she would never ask a question concerning him, and so far she never had ; but now she saw something in her husband's face which impelled her to say—

“ Is Basil ill—is there anything the matter ? ”

Captain Stondon looked at his wife as she spoke, and seeing her pale, anxious countenance—her eager, earnest expression, turned sick as he answered—“ He is ill ; he is coming back to England. You see what he says.” And he tossed the letter over to her, and then got up and walked to the window, and looked out, with such feelings of bitterness swelling in his heart as were only imagined by God and himself.

He made no man his confidant ; but the knowledge that had come to him among the pines,

while the autumn wind moaned through the branches, and went sobbing away into the night, had whitened his hair, and bowed his head, and taken the pride and the trust and the happiness out of his heart. He had his wife safe—as the world calls safety; there was no speck on her honour, so far as the world knew. Yet no time could ever make her seem to him as she had been—the Phemie he had held to his heart among the hills. The pure, innocent, guileless Phemie had gone, and left him in her stead a woman, whose thoughts morning, noon, and night, were wandering over the sea; who loved Basil as she had never loved him; whom he could not accuse of perfidy, because she had not been false; to whom he dared not speak of his sorrow, because he dreaded seeing her face change and change at finding her secret discovered, her trouble known.

And all the time Phemie was wishing that by any means he and she could come nearer to each other again—that she could show him more love, more attention, greater attachment. She was

very wretched, and she wanted some one to comfort her ; it made her miserable to notice his whitening hair, his bent head, his feeble steps, his failing health ; she thought of him now with a tenderness such as she had never felt for him in the years before any one came between them ; and if she could by any will or act of her own have kept her thoughts from wandering away to that man in the far-off land, she would have done so.

Even now she was not glad to hear he was coming back ; she laid down the letter when she had quite finished it ; and her husband, turning from the window, caught her eyes making a very long and sorrowful journey into the future. He knew by that look she was true—knew that the clear, honest eyes could never have held such a sad, wistful expression in their blue depths, had the news not been a trouble to her as well as a surprise.

She was thinking the same thoughts as her husband at that moment ; she was wondering, as

he was wondering, whether Basil were really ill or whether he was making bad health a pretext for returning to England; and she was resolving that if Basil came home unchanged, she would at all hazards speak to her husband, and let him comprehend how matters really stood; while he, on his part, was thinking that, supposing Basil were playing a false game in any way, he would either take Phemie abroad, or else—well, yes—there should be confidence—painful confidence between them at last.

And yet the man's heart yearned towards Basil. He had been fond of him as he might have been of a son; and if he were ill, if he had overcome his madness, if he could live in England, and yet not seek to destroy what measure of peace still existed in Phemie's heart, Captain Stondon felt he should be glad to see the man whose love for his wife had driven him forth into exile, on British ground again.

The mysteries of human nature are inexplicable; its inconsistencies are never ending. For



any outsider even to attempt to describe all Captain Stondon had thought and felt about his wife and Basil—about Basil and his mother—about himself and Phemie, would be useless. I can only say that he was sorry and he was glad at the news contained in Basil's note. He had been wretched about the young man; Mrs. Montague Stondon made his life a weariness concerning her son. He felt that if Basil died abroad he should feel as though he had almost two deaths to answer for. If Basil would only marry, if Phemie could only forget the love that had been a curse to her, if he could only see oftener the look in his wife's face which had just comforted him, he believed his declining days might still be bright with sunshine.

And Phemie's first comment on the letter was satisfactory.

"Of course," she said, "Basil will go to his mother. He had better not come here. I would rather he did not learn to look upon Marshlands as his home again. Do not think me hard,

Henry," she went on, pleadingly; "I have my reasons. It was bad for Basil leading the idle life he did with us, it was indeed."

"My love, my own darling wife, if you only tell me what you wish, I will be guided by you. I think I should have been wise to listen to you before."

"Well, listen to me now," she entreated; "if his health be really bad, give him a handsome allowance and let him travel. Let him make his head-quarters with his mother—let him do anything but come here. You will not give in to him, Henry?" she went on; "you will be firm; you will keep our home as it is, without bringing strangers here again. Will you not?—will you not?"

She was older then than when this story opened—older by ten years; but her beauty at seven-and-twenty was almost as great as it had been at seventeen; and while she stood there, pleading against the love of her heart—stood with flushed cheek and soft, low, tender voice, in the tones of which there was yet a touch of passionate

regret, Captain Stondon felt that, though they had been separated for so long, there would still be danger for Basil near her; and then he wished Basil were not returning. He would have given half Marshlands to have kept him out of England.

There was one thing, however, which induced Captain Stondon to believe that his relative was really ill—viz., the fact that he meant to perform his homeward journey by long sea, to spare himself the fatigue of the overland route. There could be no deception about this matter. He mentioned the name of the vessel in which he had taken his passage; he stated the period about which she might be expected to arrive; he requested Captain Stondon to break the news of his serious illness to his mother, and ask her to prepare for his reception.

“God knows,” he finished, “whether I shall ever live to see England again; but if I do, I should like to stay for a time at Hastings.”

Reading his letter over for the first time, the

earnest brevity of his communication failed to strike Captain Stondon ; but the longer he pondered over Basil's words, the more satisfied he felt that he had been stricken down by some terrible sickness, and that perhaps he was, after all, only coming home to die.

"And if so—better so," Phemie thought ; "better he should die than that we should have to live through the past again, with its shame, and its sorrow." And then, in the solitude of her own room, she covered her face with her hands, and wept aloud.

Can the old love ever die ? Can we ever bury that body out of our sight, and heap the mould upon it, and tramp it into the clay ? The men and the women may change—they may grow old—they may die—they may pass from the familiar haunts, and the place which has known them may know them no more ; but still the picture painted long and long before on the canvas of some human fancy remains young and fresh and lovely. There it hangs on the walls of the heart, and not all the

world's dust—not all the world's cares—not all time's ravages can make those dear features other than beautiful for ever.

Well, well, the dark days were at hand when Phemie could have nothing but recollection; when the picture hung in the innermost chamber would be all she might ever hope to see more; when the man's memory would be encircled with a halo of mystery; when a sad and tender interest would surround the last hours of Basil Stondon's life, giving to his fate that sad and pathetic interest which was alone needed to fill Phemie's cup of love and sorrow full unto overflowing.

The ship sailed, and the ship came, but Basil Stondon did not arrive with her; neither did the next Indian mail bring any explanation of his absence. Captain Stondon wrote to the owners, who stated, in reply, that they knew a Mr. Stondon had sailed in the *Lahore*; but as the vessel had been laid up for repairs, and the captain and mates and most of the crew had shipped in a new

merchantman belonging to the same firm for China, till the return of the mates or captain they (Messrs. Hunter, Marks, Son, and Co.) would be unable to obtain further information. Meanwhile, they remained Captain Stondon's obedient servants.

After that there ensued a pause, during which Captain Stondon wrote to General Hurlford, requesting tidings of Basil. Before any reply could be looked for to this communication the news of the Indian mutiny arrived in England, and throughout the length and breadth of Great Britain there arose such a cry of distress and terror as drowned the sound of any single grief—of any individual's solitary sorrow.

Straightway down to Marshlands came Mrs. Montague Stondon—came demanding her son as though Captain Stondon hid him there in durance.

"You know, now, what has happened to him," she said. "He saw what was approaching, and would not desert his post. You see for your-

self." And she thrust the "Times" into Captain Stondon's face. "General Hurlford is killed; and Thilling, and Osmonde, and hundreds of others whose names are not mentioned; and my boy is dead too—murdered—butchered, and by you."

Marshlands never witnessed such scenes previously as were enacted within its walls for a fortnight after that. Mrs. Montague would not stay in the house of her "son's murderer," but remained at Disley, where she made descents on Captain Stondon, whose life she almost harassed out of him by entreating that he would obtain accurate information for her.

"If I could but know where he was buried, it would comfort me," she said. And then she relapsed into violent hysterics at the idea that perhaps he was not buried at all. "First my husband — now my son. And it was your doing, his going out there," she would remark to Captain Stondon, Phemie, and Miss Derno. "You were all against him—all. Because he

was next heir you hated him. You sold him into captivity as Joseph's brethren sold him ; and now he is dead, and I shall see his face no more."

"One ought not to speak ill of the dead," remarked Miss Derno. "But sure am I that whatever has happened to Basil, he never of his own free will, got into the middle of that mutiny ; and it is perfectly unreasonable for you to insist on anything of the kind."

"Where is he, then ?" demanded Mrs. Montague.

"That I am quite unable to tell you," answered Miss Derno. "If only for Captain Stondon's satisfaction, I wish I knew. But my belief is that Basil is not dead at all."

"I wish I could believe that, Miss Derno. Oh ! I wish I could," said Captain Stondon. And the poor old man, utterly broken down by the absence of the son and the reproaches of the mother, burst into tears.

At this period Phemie took the most decided

step of her married life. She forbade Mrs. Montague Stondon the house.

"You shall not come here," she said, "and speak to my husband as you do. We are as sorry about Basil as even you can be." For a moment she faltered. "We did all we could for him while he was in England; and if anything has happened to him, Captain Stondon is not the one to blame for it. He cannot bear these reproaches. He is not able to leave his room to-day; and the doctor says he must be kept perfectly quiet, and free from excitement."

Then Mrs. Montague Stondon broke out. She denounced Phemie as a scheming adventuress; she spoke of Captain Stondon as a cold-blooded murderer. She declared Miss Derno was a disappointed woman, and that Phemie had wanted to catch Basil for her cousin Helen; failing in which object, and angry at having no children to succeed to the estate, she sent him abroad to die.

She showed how grievously the idea of losing

Marshlands had affected her. She declared the only reason Phemie wished to prolong Captain Stondon's life was because at his death she would cease to be a person of consequence.

To all of which Mrs. Stondon listened quietly, till the speaker was quite exhausted, when she took her by the hand and led her towards the door.

"I am not going to put any indignity on Basil's mother," she said; "but as no person shall have a chance of uttering such words before me twice, I mean to see you to your carriage myself, and must beg you never to enter the gates of Marshlands again so long as I am mistress here."

A servant was standing in the hall as the pair passed out together—and so Mrs. Montague had to content herself with hissing in Phemie's ear—"I hope I shall live to see you a beggar, to see you back in the mud he picked you out of."

"You are very kind," Phemie answered, aloud,

and she remained at the hall-door watching the carriage till it disappeared from sight. Then she turned away and walked slowly up the stairs, and along the wide passages, and entered the room where her husband was lying in bed, with the doctor seated beside him.

"That letter, dear," he murmured; "that letter we had this morning. I am afraid I shall not be able to make the inquiries for some time."

"If you are better to-morrow, shall I go to town and see Mr. Hunter?" she asked, "or should you like me to send for my uncle?"

"I should like you to do both," he answered; and accordingly the next day Phemie started for London, and proceeded from the Eastern Counties Railway Station, where Duncan met her, to the offices of Messrs. Hunter, Marks, Son, and Co., Leadenhall Street.

"You will come and stay with us?" Duncan said. The "us" referring to himself and his sister Helen, who was his housekeeper; but Phemie refused.

"I must return to Marshlands as soon as possible," she said. "I feel wretched about being away at all, only it was a comfort to Captain Stondon for me to come up and learn what Mr. Hunter had to tell us. They have got his boxes, Duncan."

"Then he did sail?"

"I am going to hear all about it—all they can tell me." And she looked out at the block there always is at the point where Cornhill and Gracechurch and Leadenhall Streets join, in order to hide her face from Duncan.

The punishment was not over; it was now but the beginning of the end.

Mr. Hunter received her in a large office on the first floor, which was well, not to say luxuriously, furnished. There were comfortable chairs, there was a library-table in the centre of the room, the floor was covered with a turkey carpet, the blinds were drawn down over plate-glass windows. The only articles out of keeping with the generally stylish appearance of the

apartment were three large boxes, one of which had been opened, and to which Mr. Hunter directed Mrs. Stondon's attention.

"We advertised those boxes for months, and at last opened one of them. It is so unusual a thing for passengers' luggage not to be labelled, that when Captain Stondon applied to us for information we never thought of associating that luggage with his missing relative. But the papers we have discovered leave no doubt as to the gentleman's identity; and one of the sailors, who was laid up from the effects of an accident when the *Singapore* was ready for starting, has since called here and given us full particulars on the subject of his fate. He says he remembers a gentleman being carried down to the *Lahore* the very morning she sailed. He looked in a dying state when brought on board, and before a week had passed all was over. He was buried the next day."

"Where?" Phemie interrupted—then—

"Oh, my God!" It was all the moan she ever

made, but she reeled as she uttered it—reeled and would have fallen but that Duncan caught her.

“There is but one burial-place for those who die at sea,” was the reply, spoken gently and hesitatingly. “Far from land, it is impossible to do anything with the body except——”

“I did not know that this lady was so near a relative,” began Mr. Hunter, apologetically; but Phemie broke across his sentence.

“What more? He was buried, you say? Had he no one with him—no servant—no friend?”

“He had his servant, the man tells me, who took the bulk of his luggage away with him directly the *Lakore* came into the docks. He must have satisfied the captain on the matter by some plausible tale, or else he would not have been permitted to do so. How he chanced to leave those boxes I am at a loss to imagine, for I conclude his object was to appropriate the property. We can hear nothing further, however,

till the return of the *Singapore*, for the surgeon who was on board the *Lahore* has gone on even a longer voyage, and will be away for three years."

"The passengers?" suggested Duncan.

"True," answered Mr. Hunter, "you might learn something from them. About these boxes? You would wish them sent on to Marshlands, I presume?"

"No," said Phemie; "his mother ought to have everything belonging to him. I will write to her, and then she will say where she should like them forwarded."

She asked no more questions, she made no further remark; there were no confidences exchanged between her and Duncan on their way back to the station, only as he stood by the carriage window waiting till the train should move off, her cousin said, a little bitterly—

"How fond you were of that man, Phemie." And she replied—

"If you had died far from home and friends as he did, should I not be sorry for you too?"

She put up her face and kissed him as she spoke these words. The Phemie of old was dead—the vain, fanciful, exacting Phemie; but for my part, I love better the Phemie who sat back in the carriage all the way down to Disley than the Phemie who had looked out over the flat Cambridgeshire fields five years before.

It was over—with her as with him; she had earned her wages, and they were being paid to her as the months rolled by. Death—he was dead! What had life to offer her in the future? what could the years bring to her worse than this?

At Disley, the carriage was waiting for her, and something in the footman's face as he stood aside while she entered it, made her pause and ask—

“How is your master?”

“He has been worse since morning, ma'am; the doctor was with him when we left Marshlands.”

“Drive fast, Sewel,” she said to the coach-

man; "do not spare your horses." And accordingly Sewel took his favourite pair of bays back to Marshlands (to' the intense astonishment of society) at a gallop.

CHAPTER II.

WIDOWED.

PHEMIE was not in the house two minutes before she knew her husband had had a paralytic stroke. The doctor was still with him ; but in such a case, what can a doctor do ? When the Almighty strikes—when the blow falls, which no skill is able to avert—of what use are God's instruments ?

From that day Phemie's work was laid out for her. To nurse him, to tend him, to take the man who had raised her from poverty to wealth, hither and thither as the medical men advised, or as his own fancy dictated ; that was the employment of Mrs. Stondon's life.

Mr. Aggland, now a widower, came and stayed

at Marshlands ; he it was who propped the sick man up in bed—who read to him—who amused him—who accompanied them from place to place—who thought that never a husband had found so devoted a wife as Phemie—who made his head-quarters in London, that he might be near his niece, and who, after Mr. Keller's death, made his head-quarters at Roundwood, Mrs. Keller not desiring to continue her residence there.

Phemie was a great woman at last. An heiress in her own right—a person who, without any Marshlands at all, could have taken a high place in society ; and yet the Phemie of those days was humbler, sweeter than the Phemie who had dreamed dreams in the valley of Tordale—who had lingered beside the waterfall, and sat beside Strammer Tarn.

How did her new dignity of heiress become her ? many a reader may want to know ; and yet I think the reader who asks that can have read the life-story of Phemie Keller to little purpose.

How does wealth affect those who have discovered the powerlessness of wealth to confer happiness? How did wealth affect this woman who had not found wealth do much for her?

It simply suggested to her one idea—that money had come too late; that her life had been throughout one great mistake; that, as a rule, lives were great mistakes.

The burden of the song was sorrow—the refrain of the song was work. And her work, as I have said before, was laid out for her: she had from the day she returned from London to attend to her husband, ceaselessly.

They went for the winter to Hastings. The doctor recommended it, and Phemie went wherever the medical men desired.

Now the sea talked to her differently: all through those long, dreary, interminable months she listened to the winds and the waves while they mourned to her of Basil's last resting-place—of the restless ocean, in the midst of which he had lain him down to sleep.

In those days there was no one to come between her and her husband—no one; friend—nor lover—nor relation—and accordingly Phemie was able to devote herself to him heart and soul.

For a time he seemed to rally, but the constitution was too enfeebled—the shock had been too severe. While they were at Hastings, Captain Stondon had a second stroke; and though his doctor pooh-poohed the calamity to Phemie, still she felt unsatisfied, and paid a visit to a London physician on her own account.

“If a person have a second paralytic stroke,” she said—“remember I want the simple truth—what is the usual consequence? Can the patient recover?”

For a moment, the man of large experience hesitated, then he said,

“After a second stroke, as a rule, there can be but one thing more—a third——”

“Which is——” Phemie suggested.

“Death.”

She turned away—she felt suffocating. Death!

He had been her best friend through the most trying period of her life ; and she had loved—oh, heavens ! in spite of all faults and shortcomings, she *had* loved him.

“I should like you to see my husband,” she faltered out. And then the doctor was very sorry for his words ; but he went down to Hastings to see Captain Stondon notwithstanding.

She wanted to get him back to Marshlands ; but the medical attendants shook their heads. She would have given anything to be able to move him to his own home ; but the physicians said that unless a decided change for the better occurred such a journey was not to be thought of.

“You would like to get back, dear,” she said to him, when the spring buds were jutting out—when the primroses were springing in the hedges—when the hyacinths in Fairlight Glen were showing for flower ; and the poor lips that could now answer in nothing save monosyllables, framed the one word—“Yes.”

“Shall I try to move you there, darling ? ” she

asked ; and the dim eyes lighted up with pleasure, and the wan fingers clasped hers tighter, and over the white lips passed the monosyllable "Yes !" once more.

"You do not like this place," she went on, fearful that her own detestation of the sea—the cruel sea, might be leading her astray with regard to his wishes ; and he answered, "No !"

Then she resolved to move him. And she did it.

Before a fortnight was over he was lying in his own room at Marshlands, listening to the song of the birds—to the cawing of the rooks—to the sweet spring sounds—that never seem quite the same when heard away from home.

In the years gone by he had wished a wish—he had prayed a prayer ; and now, when the dark days were come upon him—when his strength was turned into weakness—his noon changed to night—when he lay unable to speak—unable to move—the memory of that prayer came back to him.



"O God!" he said, when he stooped over the pool, and drank of the waters, "when Thy good time comes, leave me not to die alone."

Through the days that had passed since then, his soul went back. Tordale was with him in the time of which I am now writing, as the days of his boyhood were with him when he lay bruised and maimed at the foot of Helbeck.

For ever he was turning round that rock which brought him within view of the valley and the waterfall and the everlasting hills. Eternally the dull splash of the stream as it fell over the rocks—the faint rustling of the leaves—the mourning farewell of the rivulet—the trickling of the water among the stones—sounded in his ear. Dead as he was to the scenes of this beautiful world—powerless though he was to lift himself up and look forth on God's earth, which he had loved so dearly, still he could remember many things, and amongst them Tordale, which he had once said lightly he should never forget.

Never! for ever! There he had been happy

—there he had met Phemie—there he had heard that sweet girlish voice singing the old Covenanting Hymn—there he had wooed and won her, and now the tale was told—the sands were running out—the sun was near its setting—the end which comes sooner or later to all human hopes and fears, troubles and pleasures, was drawing nigh unto him; the wife who had never loved him as much as he had loved her, still hung over his sick-bed, and anticipated his lightest want.

“If she could but know.” And in those hours, had speech been vouchsafed to him, he could have talked to her about their common trouble. “If God would but give me power to talk once more, I would not remain silent as I have done.” And with light from eternity streaming in upon the pages of the past, he saw that his silence had been wrong, his forbearance useless; he vaguely comprehended that if he had opened his heart to Phemie in the days gone by, Basil need not have left for India, while perfect confidence would have reigned between him and her.

"But she will understand it when I am gone," he thought; "she will know then how I loved her through all."

That was the story the weary eyes tried to tell Phemie as they followed her about the room; that was the assurance he tried to convey when he clasped her soft hand—when by sign and gesture he kept the dear, pale, changed face near to his own; when he looked at the white cheek, white and worn; when he strove to return the remorseful kisses she laid upon his lips.

Summer came—summer with its sunshine, its roses, its mirthful gladness, its wealth of beauty and of perfume—summer came and shone down on the sweet valley of Tordale once again.

Twelve years previously, Captain Stondon, seated in the church porch, shaded from the mid-day sun, wearied with his walk from Grassenfel, had speculated vaguely upon death; and now, lying in his bed at Marshlands, with the windows flung wide to admit both air and sun-

shine, tired with his long walk through life, he thought about death once more.

After all, when it comes to this with any person, no existence seems to have lasted for years, and years, and years. There has been a sunrise and a noontide and a sunset; the day is done, the night draws on, the task is finished, the labourer hies him homeward from the last hour's work he shall ever be called upon to perform.

What more—what more! Oh, friends, the longest life ends with some work, to our thinking, left unfinished—some seventh unresolved—some lesson unlearnt; but who amongst us can tell the why and the wherefore of this mystery? Who can explain the meaning of this universal law? We can write the story up to a certain point, but there our knowledge ceases.

When mortal sickness comes to put a finish to the life-history, what can any one say further? The man has lived, the man has died, the day is ended, the night has closed in. Draw we the curtains, and leave the room—there is nothing

further to be written ; sleep has come to the tired eyelids—ease to the worn-out frame ; there is great peace where there was much suffering. The heat has been borne, the burden is laid aside ; the wayfarer has reached his long home ; the unquiet heart is still ; in the shadows of evening man ceases from his work and from his labour, and sinks to his long rest.

What more ? Nothing, my readers ; that is, nothing of the stranger whom we met so long ago gazing in the summer sunshine upon Tor-dale. Captain Stondon was dead, and Phemie—a widow ! and there was no direct heir to Marsh-lands.

CHAPTER III.

THE LETTER.

WHEN trouble came upon her, Phemie was not left alone to bear it. Kind hearts and loving sympathised with her—friendly hands clasped hers—true men and women were near to give what comfort they could, or, at all events, to share in her distress.

Mr. Aggland and Duncan, and Helen and Miss Derno, were all with Phemie when the end came. Norfolk was importunate in its inquiries—Norfolk, professing to feel very sorry about Captain Stondon's death, wondered who would succeed to the property, and whom Phemie would marry.

Mr. Ralph Chichelee had hopes—intentions,

rather, would perhaps be a better word; but then other people had intentions also, so perhaps it is scarcely fair to mention his in particular.

Phemie was still beautiful enough to attract admiration—still young enough to love and be loved—still fascinating enough to choose a second husband and rule over a new home. The prospect opened out before Phemie by Captain Stondon's death seemed to society like a vision of fairyland. She might marry an earl. The Duke of Seelands had inquired particularly who she was one day when he beheld her driving from the Disley Station. How would Phemie like the strawberry leaves? Norfolk began forthwith to wonder, while the man who had loved her so well was lying dead in one of the pleasant rooms at Marshlands. Concerning "that young man Aggland" the gossips had also something to say; they marvelled if, instead of marrying for rank, Phemie's uncle would trap her into wedding her cousin. Where would she live? What would she do? She possessed a fine pro-

perty of her own, and doubtless Captain Stondon had done well pecuniarily by his wife.

Was not this a dainty dish for a county to feast on and speculate over? while the flavouring was supplied by an all-devouring curiosity to know who was the next heir male. Remote relations, unheard-of before, came from the uttermost parts of the earth to claim the property. Stondons who had gone down in the world—Stondons who had gone up in the social scale—arrived at Disley when the news of Captain Stondon's death was noised abroad. There was no near heir, and every man of the connection consequently claimed to be next-of-kin. Who would be master? What would Phemie do? Whom would Phemie marry? What a pity she had no children—what a sad thing it was Mr. Basil Stondon had gone abroad! These were the questions and remarks everybody made and everybody asked.

As for Phemie, she grieved for her dead husband with a sorrow which was neither conven-

tional nor circumscribed. The best friend woman ever possessed he had been to her through all the years of her married life.

Through that part of her existence when she may be said to have lived he had stood beside her.

In sickness, in sorrow, in prosperity, he had thought of her, and of her only. No one in the after time could ever be so fond or proud of her as he had been; no one could ever step in and fill his place. She had never had to think for herself—to take any trouble which his love could keep from her; he had been true and faithful and tender, and the return she had made would have broken the heart of the man who now lay so still and stiff, could he have known it.

“Better so,” she thought, “better so. I would rather see him thus”—and she kissed the cold brow and lips—“than imagine his grief, could he have guessed what I was—I whom he trusted—too well, too well!” And she wept through the hours beside his coffin till her friends forcibly removed her.

"I never loved him enough—I never knew till now how much I loved him," were the contradictory sentences she kept constantly repeating; and then Miss Derno, who could guess so well wherein the worst sting of this death lay, drew the poor weary head on to her breast and rested it there.

"And I was once very unjust to you," Phemie went on, sobbing out her confession. "There was a time when I thought I did not like you, and it was wicked of me to misjudge you as I did. You forgive me, dear, don't you? and you will not ask me why I misjudged you?"

"I forgive and I will not ask. Shall we be friends now—true friends for evermore?" And she bent down till her curls swept Phemie's face, and then the poor trembling lips touched hers, and the widow broke out sobbing more passionately than ever.

So the days wore on—the weary days with death in the house—till at last the morning came when all that was mortal of Captain

Stondon passed out of the gates of Marshlands and on to the churchyard at the other end of the hamlet. He had gone for ever. Phemie realised that fact when she stole to the room where he had lain—when she understood that she had looked on his face for the last time in this world—when she turned desperately towards the future, and confronted it without his help—without his supporting hand—without his encouraging voice—alone—wholly and entirely, so far as the close companionship, as the watchful care given to her by Captain Stondon was concerned.

She had not valued him living, and now he was dead.

She had sorrowed for that man lying under the sea, and there was treason in her sorrow towards the husband just taken from her. Even indeed in that bitter hour she could not put the memory of Basil aside—could not help thinking how hard it was he had been taken in his youth and hope away from earth, away from Marshlands !

She thought this, and then, with a despairing moan, knelt down in the room where she should never more see her husband, and cried till the fountain of her tears seemed exhausted, till, for very faintness and weariness, she could cry no more.

When Captain Stondon's will came to be read, it was found that he had indeed remembered his wife with the most generous and ungrudging trustfulness.

He had saved and purchased—purchased this little estate and that small farm; invested in some paying companies, and accumulated money for her benefit. With the exception of an annuity to Mrs. Montague Stondon, and some few legacies, he left Phemie the entire of his personal property, all he had been able to put by during the years since he came into possession of Marshlands. There was no condition attached; he said nothing about a second marriage, he made no proviso, he attached no restrictions, he left almost everything he owned in the world, to

Phemie absolutely after his death, just as in life he had given her his heart and his substance, wholly and unconditionally.

As for Marshlands, of course it had to go to the next heir—but who was the next heir?

There were not wanting claimants in abundance. Stondons from Devonshire, Stondons from Perth, Stondons from Ireland, Stondons from abroad, were eager in pressing their separate claims. Old men and young, men who looked as though they had been buried for a hundred years and then dug up again, and let out for a day to state where they were born, and who had been their father—men again who were worn and haggard, to whom even a few acres of the great estate would have been ease and competence—men who had all their lives long been fighting the battle of poverty, and probably pawned some of their goods to defray the expenses of the journey—men fresh from their oxen and their ploughshares, who had come “parly,” with a sharp country practitioner: all

these laid siege to Marshlands, and strove to make their title appear good; and whilst they were wrangling and disputing over the matter, Phemie still clung to the old walls like a cat, reluctant to quit the place where fires had once blazed cheerfully for her.

She wrote to her late husband's lawyers, begging them to give her timely notice when the new owner might be expected, and the answer which came back sounded to her like the voices of the dead.

They enclosed a letter which, "as she would perceive," Captain Stondon had instructed them to forward to her a month after his decease, whenever that might occur, and they begged to assure her she should have full information whenever anything definitive was settled. They (Messrs. Gardner, Snelling, and Co.) thought it was useless considering the claims of any other person until the fact of Mr. Basil Stondon's death was proved past doubt.

"Proved past doubt." Oh, heavens! is it not

hard to think that what is evidence sufficient for love is not evidence sufficient for law? Till that instant Phemie had never for a moment doubted the accuracy of the tidings which had reached England, but now, with a bound, hope sprung to life again.

It had been so easy to remain true to her husband with Basil dead; but Basil living! Over and over and over she conned the lines suggesting this probability, while the other letter—the enclosure, the message from the newly-made grave—lay unheeded beside her.

To do Phemie justice, she did not couple together the sentences—Basil is living, and I am free. She had never thought of marrying him, and she did not now; but she had loved him, and, as I have said, the old love never dies; it is the one thing in this mutable world which is immutable; it is the one temporal possession of our mortality which is immortal. She could not kill it, she could not bury it; the winter's frosts and the winter's snows had lain upon it,

yet here it was, springing up fresh and green and fair and beautiful as ever.

If he were but alive ! and then all at once her eyes fell on her black dress, and she remembered with a shock the man who was but too surely dead. There lay his letter, with this written on the outside—" To be given to my wife one month after my death in case she survives me ; to be burnt in the event of her dying before me."

It always seems a solemn and a strange thing when the idea of his or her own death is presented as a precautionary possibility to the mind of a person in health.

Insurance forms, for instance, appear to put a matter about which most people, I suppose, think sometimes after a fashion, in a new light before the senses of an intending insurer.

There is a regular debit and credit statement. You may die—you may not die ; you are such an age, and inasmuch as you are such an age, the chances are against the length of the years to come ; on the other hand, you are healthy, active,

temperate. It is not a sermon, it is not a warning, it is not a mere possibility; it is a rule-of-three sum worked out, not very accurately it may be, but still calmly and dispassionately. You may die, you may not die, and you are rated accordingly; you may live, you may not live, and the law and common sense take precautions in consequence.

When that letter was written the future lay shrouded from view, that future was the present now, and he had died; but she might as well have died, and then—why that letter would have been burnt, and she never a bit the wiser.

Life's firmest ground is insecure, its strongest fortresses powerless against the touch of the great destroyer. Vaguely this idea took root in Phemie's mind as she read the lines I have copied, ere breaking the outer seals and taking out the letter folded inside.

"Mrs. Stondon" was the direction on the cover, but on the actual envelope were traced the words—"To my dear wife," and the paper

that envelope contained began — “My dearest Phemie.” His! The hand that penned the sentence, that had been warm when the letter was folded, sealed, and directed, was cold enough now.

Well-a-day!—ah, well-a-day!—there are many bitter hours in life, and one of those hours was striking for Phemie then. In the twilight she sat reading, while her tears fell fast and hot on the paper; in the twilight she understood at last the nature of the man she had loved so lightly—the man who, in the time of his fiercest trial, wrote thus to the wife whose heart he found had never throbbed with love for him.

“MY DEAREST PHEMIE,—When you receive this I shall be lying in my quiet grave, and you will be my widow. To you, my widow, I write that which I could never have said to my wife. It seems to me at this moment that I am almost writing these words from another world, for the old things bear new forms, and life itself is

changed to me within the last few hours. My love, my wife, my child, I know all now—your strength, your weakness, your secret; and if I could give you happiness at this moment by any personal sacrifice, God is my witness—God in whose presence I shall stand when you read this—that I would try to do so; but, my darling, it is impossible. I cannot undo the past: let me try to make amends in the future.

“ I did wrong, Phemie—I did wrong; but it is only within the last twenty-four hours that I see this. I was old, and you were young; I was rich in money and love, and you in youth, beauty, virtue, the power of winning affection. In your inexperience, my darling, I took you unto myself, away from all chance of happy love—away to the temptation to which I have exposed you. Blind! blind! blind! I thought I could have made you so happy, Phemie, and I have learned that it was not in my power to do so. Forgive me, dear—forgive,—for I am very penitent, and very miserable!

“ What I want to say to you, my darling, is

this. If, when you read these lines, you think Basil can be to you all I tried to be, marry him after what the world thinks a prudent and fitting interval. Let no thought of me come between you and him, save this, that if it seems good to you to cast your lot with his, I wish you to do so. You have done your uttermost to give the old man your love. I know by what I heard last night that you have not hurt his honour, and I would in the years to come you should give your hand where your heart is now. Give it, remembering that if I had any need to pardon I have pardoned; that I have done my best to repair my error, and secure for you freedom from temptation during my lifetime, and happiness after my death. I never suspected you; I never spied upon you; all my knowledge came from others. The enclosed told me of your intended meeting with Basil this evening. I leave it for you to see, as perhaps you may guess who sent it (I cannot), and be on your watch against a secret enemy when I am here to guard you no longer. This is

the last thing I can do for you. God grant it may turn out for your welfare here and hereafter.

“H. S.”

In the twilight she read it; when the summer night came, she still sat on thinking with a terrible despair, with a sickening remorse about the irreparable past—about the hopeless future. He had known—he had known how fond she was of Basil; but he could never know now how fond she had been of him! And Phemie would have given all the years of her future life for ten minutes from the past—ten minutes to explain, to confess, to weep out her repentance, and then, if need be, to part.

But amid all her grief there was another and perhaps a stronger feeling—anger against the person who enlightened Captain Stondon, who had driven Basil across the seas.

She could have fought out her fight alone, she thought. Had she not done so? She could

have spoken herself to her husband when she found the burden of the day too much, the heat of the battle too fierce. How came it she had never suspected interference before? How could she ever have forgiven Miss Derno, and varied in her opinion concerning her?

"She wrote that letter." Thus Phemie ended the mental argument. "She fancied she would get him for herself, and she did not care what misery she brought to any one else—a double-faced hypocrite! Well, Miss Derno, you have played your last game out with me." And Phemie folded up the letters, and put them aside in a drawer, resolving to make no mention of their contents to any one.

She felt wretchedly ill. Her head was burning, her hands and feet were cold as ice. When her maid came to know if she would wish her tea brought up into her dressing-room, she said, "No," and bade the woman say to Mr. Aggland that she desired to see him.

"Uncle," she began, when he obeyed the sum-

mons, "I have had a great shock to-night, and I fear I am going to have a bad illness. "Count that," and she laid his fingers on her pulse; "promise me that if I should be delirious you will get a nurse from London. I do not want Helen nor any of the servants to come near me, and, beyond everything, keep Miss Derno away."

Whereupon Mr. Aggland went downstairs, and sending off straightway for a doctor, told Miss Derno he thought Phemie must be "light-headed;" acting upon which information, Miss Derno went upstairs, and knocked at Mrs. Stondon's door, which was opened by Mrs. Stondon's maid, who said her mistress had gone to bed with a bad headache.

"Is that Miss Derno?" cried out Phemie; "let her come in—I wish to speak to her; and you may go away, Marshall. Are you there?" she exclaimed, as the door closed behind the woman. "Come near to me. That will do. Now then, what do you want?"

"I want to know how you are, dear," said Miss

Derno, approaching the bed, and trying to take one of Phemie's hands in hers, but Phemie pulled it away.

"I will be fair and frank with you, Miss Derno," she began; "I will speak freely to you now, as I once thought never to speak freely to mortal. Within the last few hours I have learnt all; I have learned who sent Basil Stondon to India; who told my husband that I—that he——"

"That Basil loved you," supplied Miss Derno
"If you mean that, I certainly plead guilty; but, Mrs. Stondon, was I wrong?"

"Wrong or right what business had you to come between my husband and me?" retorted Phemie, sitting bolt upright in bed; while the loosened waves of her hair, that she wore ordinarily braided so closely under her cap, rippled down over throat and shoulders and pillows.
"Could you not have left *me* to deal with Basil without breaking the heart of as good a man as ever possessed an unworthy wife?"

"I never told Captain Stondon that I thought you loved Basil," was the reply.

"But you sent him where he could hear it for himself," answered Phemie. "You told him to go to the pine plantation that night when Basil and I parted."

Here Mrs. Stondon stopped: there seemed to come around her as she spoke the twilight of the autumn evening, the moaning of the wind, the leaves beneath her feet. She could not go on, and so she paused, while Miss Derno said—

"I never did—I never even knew till this moment that Basil and you had a parting interview, or that Captain Stondon was present at it."

"You cannot expect me to believe that," was the retort; "you wanted Basil for yourself; you thought if once he were separated from me, he would marry you. No means seemed too treacherous to secure such a prize."

"Now heaven help the woman!" broke in Miss Derno. "Mrs. Stondon," she continued,

"are you mad? Can you think that I should scheme to win Basil Stondon? I, who refused him twice before he ever lost his heart to you?"

Hearing that, Phemie fell back on her pillow.

If Miss Derno thought to make peace by such a sentence, she mistook the nature of the woman she was speaking to.

There was no balm in Gilead for a wound like this. To have given her own love, to have deceived her husband, to have wasted her affection on a man who had loved another before her! It seemed like the very bitterness of death, and Phemie struggled against conviction.

"If you did not wish to marry Basil; if you did not write that letter, who did?" she said, half turning her face towards Miss Derno.

"I cannot tell; I cannot be sure, though I may guess——"

"That is only half an answer," persisted Phemie.

"Well, then, I guess Georgina Hurlford wrote

it. She would have had no objection to become Mrs. Basil Stondon; and I believe she was capable of committing any meanness, if by so doing she could compass her own ends."

For a moment Phemie paused; then she said—

"You confess you told my husband Basil cared for me?"

"I do; and I told him so in all honour and honesty of purpose. I knew you would not tell him. I saw Basil would never leave Marshlands of himself, and it was best I did speak to Captain Stondon. Though going to India cost Basil his life, it was best for you both that he did go. You cannot deny the truth of what I am saying."

"I do deny it," retorted Phemie, fiercely. "I would have gone through fire and water; I would have suffered tortures; I would have died myself cheerfully before letting him guess the miserable truth he learnt that night among the pines. It is no use my making any secret of what you already know. I tell you, hating you all the time for your knowledge, that I did love Basil Stondon—

God forgive me—more than I ever loved any man on earth. I loved him, detesting myself for loving him ; I loved him more than my husband, but I loved my husband better ; and because I loved him better—because he trusted, idolized, and believed I was as good and true as a wife ought to be, I had rather have fought my own battle out to the end. I would rather have borne twenty times as much as I did bear than that he should have come to share any part of the trouble with me. Oh Lord !” finished Phemie, passionately, “will my punishment never end ? Will there come no day that shall see the last of this my sin ?”

“Mrs. Stondon !” And Miss Derno laid a beseeching hand on Phemie, but Phemie again shook it off.

“You put division between us—you meddled in that which did not concern you—you sent Basil to India—you embittered the last days of my husband’s life. I know now, I know now,” she wailed out, “what made him look at me as he

often did, and I will never forgive you, never—if you were dying this minute I would not—if I were dying I would not; and I do not believe Basil ever cared for you much, and I do believe you wrote that note. If you meddled in one part, why not in the other?”

“It is of no use, I suppose, striving to argue with you,” answered Miss Derno. “There is only one thing I will say, however; not very long ago you told me you were sorry ever to have misjudged me. You are misjudging me now, and you will be sorry for having done so hereafter.”

“I shall have to bear that sorrow then as I have had to bear others,” was Phemie’s reply. “You came here professing to be fond of me—professing to like me better than any other woman in the world, and all the time you were scheming against me and mine; you were trying to put division between me and my husband; you thought perhaps nothing would kill him so soon as to tell him I was too fond of Basil; very likely you

hoped to get Basil and Marshlands together. I am saying exactly what I think—I cannot be a hypocrite, though you are one.”

“Mrs. Stondon, I never told any one you were too fond of Basil, and I never sent Captain Stondon to any place where he was likely to hear that fact for himself. What is the cause of all this excitement? who has been putting ideas into your mind? from whom have you heard?”

“I have heard from the dead,” answered Phemie; “and they, I suppose, may be trusted to speak the truth. You came spying here, watching my every word and look and movement, and then, having somehow guessed the truth, you went and informed my husband that Basil loved me. That is on your own confession—out of your own mouth I convict you. After that you expect me to believe you did not go further, and tell him I loved Basil. Do you imagine I am an idiot? do you think I have lost my senses altogether? No, no, Miss Derno, there is a point at

which credulity ceases, and you could never make me credit Georgina Hurlford wrote that note, unless I heard it from her own lips."

"Which it is not very probable you will do, in this world at all events," said Miss Derno; "for I have not the slightest idea that she is still living. Let that be as it may, however, I can only repeat what I have said, I did not try to do you any harm. I did not desire that Basil should marry me. I have tried to be your friend, and though you will not be my friend, I shall never change to you. Do not let our last word be one of anger. Good-by."

But Phemie only turned her head aside, and the great mass of her hair was all Miss Derno could see of her.

"Good-by," repeated Miss Derno, putting her hand over Phemie's shoulder, but Phemie would take no notice.

"Good-by," she said for the third time, and she stooped and kissed the shining tresses which had first caught Captain Stondon's fancy. "God

knows whether or not we shall ever meet again, but may He keep and bless you !”

And turning away she left the room slowly, and returning to Mr. Aggland, told him his niece was not at all delirious.

“But she has taken offence at something she fancies I have done,” added Miss Derno ; “and it will be best for me to leave here to-morrow morning. Do not try to make peace between us ; in time she will discover her mistake, and till then I can be patient.”

CHAPTER IV.

MEETING.

SPRING came round again; and Phemie, walking about the grounds at Marshlands, saw the crocuses and the snowdrops blooming, the daffodils rearing their gaudy heads in triumph, the violets peeping modestly up from amongst their thick covert of green leaves, and the primroses blossoming in the hedgerows and beside the wood paths.

In due time the wild hyacinths opened their blue and white bells, and perfumed the air with a delicious fragrance; in the copses the wood anemones shone like stars in shaded places; there was fresh foliage on the trees, the grass felt soft and velvety under foot; there was a stir of life throughout all nature—nature so recently awakened



from her long winter's rest. And Phemie, looking around her—looking back at the years which were past, and forward at the years which were to come—thought sadly that for all inanimate nature there is a spring-time as well as an autumn, but for man no second youth, no returning April wherein the flowers of his former existence can blossom and bloom as of yore.

She had passed through grievous sickness since the night she and Miss Derno parted; she had suffered mentally and bodily, and she was only now just crawling out again into the air and the sunshine, to see what the sweet sights and sounds of spring could do for her—she whom the world thought so fortunate a woman.

For was not she young, well dowered, well cared for? She had Roundwood to fall back upon whenever Marshlands came to be claimed by its rightful owner. Her husband was dead; but people said if she could not please herself again, supposing she desired to do so, who could?

Society felt it was the proper thing for her to live in strict seclusion, to receive no visitors, to be in a poor state of health and in low spirits ; but at the same time society concluded that when the days of mourning were expired, Mrs. Stondon would feel that it had been the will of God for Captain Stondon to die, and that as he was to die, she ought to be thankful it had likewise been the will of God to provide her with a satisfactory portion of this world's goods.

Many people were already making inquiries as to the amount of personalty Captain Stondon had left behind him, and how he had disposed of it—whilst the value of Roundwood was known to a shilling. Those ladies who had brothers or sons anxious to marry a wife able to contribute her share towards the expenses of a household, ventured hastily to remark to Mr. Aggland that they thought that Mrs. Stondon was leading too much of a quiet life. The little society, "not being a few intimate friends," was of good for her."

To which Mr. Aggland replied, in all truthfulness, that he thought the shock had been almost too much for his niece. "They were so much attached," he added, "she seems to feel his loss more and more every day."

(Which was not encouraging to the young men.)

"She will be better perhaps when we get her away from Norfolk," went on Mr. Aggland ; "change of scene will, I hope, work wonders. It is her first great sorrow in life, and you remember, madam, 'Every one can master a grief but he that has it.' Few are able to say just at the first — 'The hand of the Lord hath wrought this.' In time, I have no doubt but that her present anguish will—

'Settle down into a grief that loves
And finds relief in unreprieved tears ;
Then cometh sorrow like a Sabbath, and, last
Of all, there falls a kind oblivion
Over the going out of that sweet light
In which we had our being.' "

"What a wonderful memory you have, Mr. Aggland," said his visitor, with a simper ; and

then she drove down the avenue, and called at half-a-dozen houses, and whispered in each of them—"I do think there must be some little insanity in Mrs. Stondon's family. That uncle of hers is as eccentric and odd as possible. His brain seems to me a perfect library, or rather a book filled with familiar quotations."

"It did not strike me that they were familiar at all," said Mr. Ralph Chichelee; "quite the contrary, indeed."

"And, besides," put in Mrs. Enmoor, who had rather an affection for Phemie, "he is not her uncle by blood, only by marriage."

"But it is so strange the way she goes on," persisted the first speaker; "she sees no one—she goes out nowhere—she is even 'not at home,' or 'too ill to receive' to the clergyman's wife."

"Do you not believe she is ill, then?" asked Mr. Chichelee.

"I met her out driving one day last week, and I am sure she then looked like a ghost," added

Mrs. Enmoor. "I was quite shocked to see her."

"But she adopts no means to get well."

"I hear she is having that place of hers in Sussex put into thorough order," said Mr. Chichelee. "No doubt she will soon be leaving Marshlands now; and that reminds me—has anything been heard of the missing heir?"

"People seem convinced he is dead," was the reply.

"And who is the fortunate man in that case?" inquired Mr. Chichelee.

"A Mr. Haslett Stondon, I hear," answered Mrs. Enmoor; "who was born in Canada—a great boor, I am told. Ah! Marshlands will never again be what it was—poor dear Captain Stondon!" finished Mrs. Enmoor, with grateful reminiscences of all Phemie had tried to do for her and hers in that pretty drawing-room which looked out over the flower-garden, and the walk under the elm-trees.

It was all true—Phemie was going away, and

Marshlands would never again be bright and gay as formerly. Mrs. Stondon had scarcely realised to herself how much she loved Marshlands till she was called upon to quit it. Roundwood might be a very nice property, but it was not Marshlands. And to leave Marshlands, to vacate the old familiar rooms in favour of Mr. Haslett Stondon, a man who openly stated he should never reside there, and that with all his heart and with all his soul, and with a good many oaths into the bargain, he wished she would stay, as it would save him the expense of a caretaker!

Phemie wished so too; but still she could not continue to live in the house she had owned, as a mere tenant. It was best for her to effect her change of residence as speedily as might be, and try to get over all her troubles at once. The ray of hope that had illumined her life had faded away. No tidings came of Basil; there seemed no reason to doubt but that it was really he who had died on board the *Lahore*.

"We will leave this and go to Roundwood,

uncle, before the summer is over," she said one day. And Mr. Aggland eagerly assenting—forthwith preparations for their departure were made, and bills were posted on every wall and paling in the neighbourhood, announcing that on the —th inst. there would be an auction at Marshlands of household furniture, carriages, stock, farming utensils, &c.

"I intend to have that inlaid cabinet," said Mrs. Hurlford to her husband.

"And I," answered he, "that roan horse, if he goes at all reasonable."

"It seems strange to me she can bear to sell the furniture," remarked soft-hearted little Mrs. Enmoor, never thinking that Phemie wanted to have done with all the old associations—that she wished to forget—to begin an entirely new life in a new place.

When once her own personal effects were off the premises, Mrs. Stondon meant to proceed to Roundwood, leaving her uncle to arrange all other matters for her; and it wanted but a day

or two of her intended departure when a special messenger arrived with a letter from Messrs. Gardner, Snelling, and Co., stating that Mr. Basil Stondon was alive, that he was in England, that he might be expected at Marshlands almost at any hour.

"Uncle!" She put the letter into his hands, and then fell back in a dead faint on the sofa where she was seated.

"My dear child," Mr. Aggland said, when the weary eyes opened once more, and rested on the paper lying on the table, "my poor Phemie, I must get you away; you must be kept quiet. These surprises and sudden tidings are killing you. Those men might have had more consideration, more sense. You must leave Marshlands."

Then, as it seemed, speaking almost without her own will, Phemie cried out—

"Let me wait and see him—let me see the dead man alive again, and then take me where you will, away from this for ever. Let me stay,"

she went on, with earnest pleading, "just to welcome him back, just to make him feel he has come home, and I will leave the next hour."

That was her first prayer; her second was to leave immediately—to have everything packed up, and ready for immediate departure.

Then a new fancy seized her: she would have all the bills for the auction taken down; she would have every article of furniture put back in its place; the mirrors refixed, the pictures rehung, the curtains re-arranged; there should not be a chair out of place when the wanderer returned.

"My husband would have wished it so," she said to Mr. Aggland, and Mr. Aggland gave orders to have the rooms they had already vacated put in order, the fatted calf killed, and the house got ready for the reception of the new owner.

He certainly inclined to the opinion that Phemie was a little out of her mind. He had long thought her odd—and now he was confident

his niece was not merely odd, but also something more.

"Fainting and crying, and having the whole place upset on account of the return of a man whom she never could bear—for whom she never had a civil word!" Mr. Aggland muttered; but he comforted himself a moment afterwards by recollecting that—

"—— Good as well as ill,
Woman's at best a contradiction still ;"

and thought that perhaps, when all was said and done, Phemie's eccentricities were matters not of mind but of sex.

"I am not sure that it is good for women to have their own way," he reflected; "for if they have the guiding of themselves they are never content with one road for two minutes together. Likely as not, she will want the bills posted again to-morrow, so I won't have them taken down at any rate."

"Do you not think it would be well for you to send a messenger, begging Mrs. Montague

Stondon to come down here to receive her son?" he ventured to propose next morning.

"Am I mistress here now?" Phemie angrily retorted. "Is the house mine, to ask or to bid keep away? I ought to be out of Marshlands at this minute. I shall merely remain to touch hands with Basil, and bid him welcome home, and then go when he arrives. Let the luggage be sent over to Disley, and it will be ready for whatever train we choose to start by."

"But I think it most improbable he will be here for some days; he will naturally remain in London to see his lawyers and his mother, and——"

"Basil Stondon will come straight on to Marshlands," she interrupted. "He will not lose an hour in hastening to—to—take possession of his property." And her heart fluttered like a bird's as she spoke; while Mr. Aggland answered—

"That she seemed to have a high opinion of Mr. Basil Stondon and of his unselfishness. If

he will feel no sorrow for your husband's death, and only rejoice at your having to leave Marshlands, why do you remain to receive him, why can you not travel to Roundwood at once ? ”

“ Because it would seem hard to him—no matter what he may be—for no creature to be here to say, ‘ I am glad you are alive—God give you happiness as He has given you wealth.’ ”

“ Well, suppose I stay here and say all that in your name ? ” suggested Mr. Aggland, who had an intuitive feeling his niece would be better away. “ I can tell him all your wishes—how you desire that he shall retain the whole or any portion of the furniture—how the cows and horses, the sheep and the pigs are his to command, if he have any liking for any of them—how you have enough and to spare without stripping the house of its ornaments. I can say as well as you that ‘ there is no winter ’ in your generosity ; can prove how good a steward you have been, spending your own money on another's land. All that has occurred here since his departure I can relate

for his benefit, and I can bring news to you at Roundwood where and how he has passed the time during which we have all thought him dead. Will you take my advice, Phemie, and go? The memories he will recall, the excitement of seeing a man risen from the grave, as one may say, will certainly prove too much for you. Will you go?"

"I have a fancy to stay, uncle," she answered; "just as I said before, to wish him health and happiness before I leave Marshlands for ever. Most likely I shall never enter its doors again—let my last thought of the old home be a gracious one."

And there came such a sad, wistful look into the sweet face that Mr. Aggland could press the point no further. He only said it should all be as she wished, and entreated her to lie down and recruit her strength, so that when the journey had to be taken she might be ready for it.

"I hope to see the colour back in your cheeks

some day, my dear," he concluded. "We will all take such care of you when we get you among us once more, that you shall not have any choice left but to get well and strong again. With all your life still before you, it will never do for you to settle down into a desponding invalid."

"Have patience," Phemie answered; "let me only get this meeting over—let me once begin a new existence elsewhere, and I will try to make a good thing of it."

"Have you not made a good thing of it?" he asked; but Mrs. Stondon shook her head.

"We will not talk about the past," she replied; "the present is enough for us, surely. Let me go now, uncle," she added; "I want to be quiet for a time, quiet and alone."

Mr. Aggland followed her with his eyes, as she ascended the staircase. He felt there was something about Phemie which he could not understand—which he had never understood—"and which *I* probably never shall," he decided, when

he heard a distant door close behind her. "I do think she is very odd, but somehow very sweet."

Could he have seen what Phemie was doing at that very moment, he would have thought her odder still.

She was standing before her mirror, looking at all that was left of the Phemie who had once been so beautiful; looking at the pale, wan face, at the sharpened features, at the dark lines under her eyes, at the lines across her forehead, at her figure round and symmetrical no longer, at the ghastly whiteness of her cheeks, at the widow's cap which concealed her hair, at the black trailing dress.

Her beauty! Ah, Heaven! that had been a dream too, and it was gone—like her youth, like her gaiety, like her pride, like her vanity, like her innocence of soul—gone for ever.

She turned away from the glass, and covered her face with her hands. She was no heroine, she was a woman; and she could not help mourning

over the fact that her youth was gone and her beauty with it.

Yet what had youth and beauty done for her? —what? Had they not led her into temptation? Had she not wept such tears, whilst her eyes were bright, and her face round, and her cheeks blooming, as she hoped never to shed again till the day of her death?

Had her very loveliness not brought such suffering upon her as had wrought the wreck she was? Why should she mourn because she had no attractions left to charm the man who once loved her so passionately? Why was it so terrible to her now to realise the full force of the truth which had glimmered across her understanding that night when she sat looking through the darkness down over Tordale?

She had owned one life—on this side the grave she could never own another. In the eyes of the world she had made a very good thing of it; she had married well, she had associated well, she had succeeded to the Keller property; her

husband also had left her abundantly provided for; she had done well so far as money was concerned, but for all that Phemie knew, now when she sat looking—not through the darkness down upon Tordale, but back through the years to her girlhood—that her life had been a lost one, that although there were plenty more lives in the world still to be lived out and made much of or spoiled—enjoyed or marred—yet there could be no second existence for her, no return of the years, no retracing of her steps, no re-writing the book, no erasing the past.

Do you comprehend at last the story I have been trying to tell?—the story which has had in it so little of variety or excitement, but yet that was after all the tale of a woman's life—of a woman who, like the rest of us, whether man or woman, had but one—and spoiled it! In the world's great lottery, as I said early in these pages, her little investment might seem a mere bagatelle; but it was the whole of her capital notwithstanding.

And she had lost! Looking back, this conviction forced itself upon her; she had lost, and it was too late for her to hope for a profit in the future.

Had she hoped? had she still clung to the idea of that man loving her? had she believed they might again meet for once, as of old, and then part? What had she thought? what had she hoped till she looked critically at herself in the unflattering mirror?

My reader, I cannot tell—though that was an hour when Phemie tried hard to understand herself, to comprehend why she had wished to stay—why she now wished to go.

All that passed swiftly and sharply through her heart, it would be well nigh impossible for any one to imagine. She could not have told herself aught save this—that her part was played out, on a stage where every step had proved a failure; that there was literally nothing more left for her to do, save walk behind the scenes, and leave the ground clear for those who had

still to act out their life's drama—ill or well, as the case might be.

She rose and stood in the middle of her room irresolute. Should she go? should she not go? should she play the hostess in Marshlands for the last time? remain to greet the new owner and then pass away like the old year? or should she follow the bent of her own inclination and avoid this meeting?

Could she bear to see his look when he saw her changed face? could she assume indifference, or he forgetfulness?

"I will go," she concluded; and the grey evening shadows were settling down as this idea became a fixed determination. "I will go!—better to seem unkind than to play the fool. My uncle will wait and welcome him—a fitter one to do so than I." And she rang her bell, and bade Marshall pack the few articles still lying about, and prepare for their immediate departure.

"I think we can catch the night express," she

said ; and she went down-stairs to speak to her uncle about it.

He was not in the drawing-room, and while she remained for a moment irresolute, there was a noise in the hall as of some one's arrival.

She tried to move forward to the door, but the blood rushing back to her heart took the power of movement from her. He had come—he had come from out of those great waters—from the grave—out of the past. She forgot the years—she forgot her widow's weeds—she forgot the dead husband lying in the churchyard beyond the village—she forgot the loss of her beauty—the time that had passed—she remembered nothing save this man whom she had loved, and who had come back again ; and when the door opened she stretched out her arms towards him, and cried—" Basil—Basil !"

Then, as in a sort of fright, the dead alive, with a quick glance behind him, answered warningly, while he advanced to meet Phemie—

" And my wife !"

There are times when the very excess of their fear gives men courage ; there are occasions when the very intensity of the suffering deadens sensation ; and there are also moments in life when, out of the very depth of the previous humiliation, there arises sufficient pride to carry humanity over the most critical moment of its agony and despair.

Such a moment arrived to Phemie then. She had forgotten her pride—her dead—her resolutions ; she had stretched out her arms with a great cry of joy to the lost who was found. Another second, and, God help her ! she would have let him take her to his heart ; but, almost before his name had passed her lips there came crashing down upon her that cruel warning sentence—

“ And my wife.”

Then she saw his wife. Standing behind him in the doorway, with her bright, mocking eyes fixed on Phemie’s face, was the woman he had married.

She was younger than Phemie; watching had not paled her cheeks, nor grief wasted her figure. The mourning dress which made Phemie look so white and worn and haggard only set off the other's beauty to greater advantage; and there was a malicious satisfaction playing over every feature, as the new mistress of Marshlands heard Basil's remark, and perceived the effect it produced on Phemie. But next moment Phemie was mistress of the position.

"You are welcome!" she said, and she held out her hand, which neither shook nor faltered, towards the woman who had supplanted her. "I have waited here to say this to both of you, Georgina; waited to wish you health, wealth, and happiness in Marshlands—before leaving it for ever."

She was like a queen beside the new arrival—like a queen in her manner, her carriage, her address; and when she turned and spoke to Basil, and, looking him straight in the face, told him—with just that tremor in her voice which

comes into most voices when people speak of a great pain endured—of a great peril escaped—how she had mourned for his reported death—how she had suffered much suspense and much sorrow concerning him—how even at that moment she could scarcely believe it was really to Basil Stondon, Basil raised from the dead, she was speaking—she still remained in possession of the field, and Mrs. Basil Stondon, *née* Hurlford, gained no advantage over her.

Phemie speaking to Basil never tried to conceal how much the thought of his death had affected her; never strove to explain away her cry at his entrance. She had sustained a grievous defeat, and yet she mastered her men so well, she displayed her resources so admirably, she addressed the wife with so gracious a courtesy, and the husband with such an earnest joy and sincerity, that Georgina could scarcely decide whether, after all, she was not the one worsted in the encounter—whether the former mistress of Marshlands had not the best of the day.

She could not even flatter herself into thinking her arrival was driving Phemie off the field; for Phemie's preparations had all been made before she knew Basil Stondon had brought a wife back with him.

The departing combatant always, too, seems, like the Parthian, to be able to leave some stinging arrow behind him. There is a victory in the mere act of "going," the greatness of which is generally felt, though rarely, I believe, acknowledged.

There is a grand moral power in walking out of a room, or driving away from a house, that produces an effect on the individuals left behind. It is action—it is force—it is doing what another person is unable to do. Their intentions are powerless to detain; the will of the one combatant has been stronger than that of the other; and perhaps it was some idea of this kind which made Mrs. Basil Stondon so earnestly press Phemie to remain.

"You will not pain us—you will not be



cruel?" she urged. But Phemie had made all her arrangements, and was not to be turned aside from her path.

"I stayed but to bid you welcome—you, Basil, whom I knew were coming, you also, Georgina, whom I did not expect—it seems I remained to receive you both. Having done so, let me go, for this is my home no longer, and no kindness can ever make it seem home to me again."

She passed by them, and walked towards her uncle. "Is the carriage ready?" she asked; adding, in an undertone, "For God's sake let us get away from here at once!"

And still Phemie kept moving forward, and next moment caught sight of Basil's child.

The nurse was surrounded by a group of excited domestics, who, standing in the centre of the hall, were criticising and admiring the heir, a fine boy, who neither cried nor shrieked, but kept essaying to talk, and crowing mightily.

There are limits to all things, and there were limits even to Phemie's self-command. From

that group she turned aside and fled, up the wide staircase, along the corridor, to the room that had been hers, but which, like all the rest, must now be abandoned to strangers. She sent away her maid, she put on her bonnet, she threw her shawl around her, she took one last look out over the park, and then hurried away from the familiar apartment as though a plague were in it.

The carriage was at the door, her maid on the box beside the coachman; Georgina stood at the hall door, and Basil came out and assisted Phemie into her brougham. As he did so he whispered—

“I wanted to come down alone, but she would not let me.”

Then Mr. Aggland took his seat beside his niece, and Phemie, leaning forward, bowed a farewell to Basil and his wife; and the horses sprang forward down the long avenue and through the gates, and were soon dashing along the level road leading to Disley, leaving Marshlands far behind.



So long as they were under the shadow of the pines and the elm-trees, uncle and niece never exchanged a sentence; but once they were outside the domain, Mr. Aggland laid his hand gently on the poor thin fingers which were knotted and twisted together in a kind of convulsive agony, and said, "Phemie!"

No other word—but at the sound of that she flung herself on his breast and cried with such a frenzy of grief that he answered her inarticulate appeal for comfort with broken words of consolation and sympathy.

"Don't!" she cried—"don't! I deserve it all. Let me bear it. Oh, uncle, do you understand what has been the misery of my life at last?"

What was there to be said—what to be done—what?—but to secure a compartment all to themselves, and stow Marshall and the smaller effects into another. He felt thankful to have caught the express, even though Sewel's bays had been greatly distressed in order to compass that

desirable end. He knew Phemie's grief must have its way; and so he let her lie back and weep out her trouble as they dashed on through the night.

He did not speak to her. He did not go near her. She sat in her corner, and he in his; and they both thought—thought—while the hours went by. They travelled the same mental course—he in his way, she in hers. He recalled to mind the girl who had come to him in his sanctum to ask his advice, and whom he had afterwards prayed might never know what it was really to love.

And this was the end. O God! this was the end. And the man's eyes were dim with tears as he bent forward and looked out into the darkness.

Whilst Phemie!—she was reciting to herself and preaching out of her own experience a sermon upon it.

She had gone back to Tordale too. She was sitting—unmarried—unwooed—in that little

church under the shadows of the everlasting hills. The man whom she afterwards wedded, came in at the porch, and entered the pew, and shared her book, and he was nobody to her then.

She had been dreaming of heroes of romance—lords and knights and young esquires. And what was that middle-aged tourist to her? What concern was he of hers? What meaning had the text Mr. Conbyr selected for her either?

“The wages of sin is death!” he said. And Phemie looked down at her faded muslin dress—at her poor finery—and thought of Lord Ronald Clanronald while the preacher proceeded.

Well, the years had gone by. And she dreamed no more of youths of high degree—of skirts of green satin—of the great future that might be in store for her. The old things regarded then were unheeded now; but the truth heard so many a long day before came

home to her fully in the half darkness of that summer night.

“The wages of sin is death!” Had they not been death to her? death to every pleasant memory—to every innocent recollection—to every future hope—to every dream of happiness—to every plan—to every desire. There was nothing in her past she could look back to with satisfaction; there had been flowers, but there was a blight on them; there had been bright green foliage, but, behold, the trees were naked and bare; there had been a fair sunny landscape, but the clouds had come up, and in lieu of sunshine there was blackness—instead of rejoicing, despair.

She had given her love to that man—for his sake she had forgotten her husband, been cruel to herself. For his sake! Ah! Heaven! and he had forgotten her—forgotten all her tears—all her struggles—all her sorrow—and suffered his wife to come down and see her humiliation.



Wife and child—wife and child! had now taken possession of Marshlands. Where she had been much she was now nothing. Where she had been exalted she was brought low. Her day was declining, her reign over. “The wages of sin is death!” And the woman’s tears flowed fast.

On through the flat Cambridgeshire fields—on to the point where Hertfordshire and Essex shake hands—on to the marsh lands, and the nursery-grounds round and about Water Lane and Tottenham—on in the glad light of a summer’s morning across the Lea—and away within sight of the wooded heights of Clapton to Stratford and Mile End—and so to Shore-ditch.

On! she had preached her sermon—she had conned her lesson. She had dried her eyes, and was looking over the fields and the river—over the house-tops and the sea of red-tiled roofs, at the life on which she was going to enter.

The hour before dawn is always the darkest;

and that night was probably the blackest, in its deep despair, which Phemie Keller ever passed through.

Yet with the dawn came light; and this was the beam of sunshine which stole in on Phemie Keller's life—Duty.

Were there no sick to tend—no poor to visit—no sorrowing ones to comfort—no children to educate?

Though she had erred she would yet try to do whatever work her hand found to do.

"I will not sit down in idleness, uncle," she said. "I have sinned—I have suffered—but I will try——"

And as the train, with a shriek and a whistle, steamed into Shoreditch Station, her uncle bent down and kissed her hand with an intense pity, with an unutterable sympathy.

"'Employment is nature's physician,' says Galen," he remarked. "God in His mercy grant that it may bring you back to health."

"I mean to try," she repeated; and she drew

her veil over her face, and passed out, with the bright sunlight of that summer's morning streaming on her, into the deserted London streets.

CHAPTER V.

RECONCILED.

It was the height of the season at Hastings; the yearly heaven of lodging-house keepers had arrived; they could be firm about rent, linen, the use of plate, boot-cleaning, and kitchen fires; the millennium of temporal prosperity had, after months of weary waiting, come at last, and the reign of the saints by the sea-side had begun. As for the sinners, they had a terrible time of it. At what hour they should eat; the Spartan nature of the cookery they might expect; the rooms wherewithal they must needs content themselves; these things were announced to them by the powers in the ascendant with a severe composure.



Any man who had all his life entertained an idea that he was entitled for his money to money's worth, needed but to set foot in Hastings to be undeceived.

It was the harvest time; and all the native population of Hastings—under the Castle of Hastings, on a level with the Castle, of St. Leonards-on-Sea, and the various regions lying back from the shore, but still studded with villas and terraces—put in the sickle.

The Egyptians had come down to the sea-side, and the householders forthwith set about considering how they should best spoil them. Rents were doubled—extras were put on—items were run up—bells were not answered—servants were harassed to death—every dwelling was crammed, from basement to garret—cooks were arrogant—housemaids breathless—and still the cry went on, "They come!"—and still the place got fuller and fuller; and it was, as I have said, the height of the season in Hastings the romantic.

Was there ever a prettier bathing-place?—was

there ever a more charming dwelling for a short time? Was there ever a town round and about which there were to be found lovelier walks and drives—sweeter bits of rural scenery—more enchanting views over the great sea?

Most people seemed to have thought Hastings perfection that year, for they came flocking to it as cattle go down into a pond to drink.

They came—the autocrats of the fashionable and the would-be fashionable world—to St. Leonards, to the great houses fronting the sea, to Warrior Square, to the little houses up back streets, and to the terraces, hung up so high that ordinary limbs ached before the temporary home was reached.

Then there were old-fashioned folks who affected Hastings—who thought the old town seemed more home-like and pleasant than the new—who brought their money to spend within easy walk of the East Cliff—who loved the roads leading away to Fairlight—and the old churches in the High Street—and who declared the

bathing was better at Hastings than at St. Leonards.

Anyhow, Hastings and St. Leonards were full—too full for comfort; but not too full for amusement to anyone who knew London and its people well.

To the country squire, to the grand folks who, by reason of their great wealth and greater gentility, are far removed from all the pleasures of watching their commoner fellows and trying to understand their ways, these sea-side places must seem, as a rule, stale, flat, and unprofitable. It is the naturalist who loves to note the habits and instincts and modes of existence of the commonest animal; the bees going and coming—the ants busy at work—the mole heaps in the garden: the eccentricities of toad life have no charm to anyone who does not understand something of the nature of bee, or ant, or mole, or toad: and in like manner, the person who does not comprehend the modes of life and habits of thought of the men and the women he sees around him,

cannot reasonably be expected to take much interest in observing their peculiarities.

There are those, however, who ask no better enjoyment than watching Jones, Brown, and Robinson out for a holiday; who delight in tracing Jones to his clique, and Brown to his, and Robinson to his; who luxuriate among snobs; who, watching them staring out of the windows at St. Leonards, or airing themselves in the balconies at Robertson Terrace, or lounging up and down the Parade, or adventuring their necks on the backs of much-enduring horses, can classify the swell, the millionaire, the fortune-hunter, the pretender, the distant relation of some great house, the newly rich, the poor man of family, to a nicety.

And behold! there are all the men, women, and children he has become so familiar with in the course of his walks and residences round London.

There is Paterfamilias, drearily promenading with Materfamilias, and making believe to enjoy

a holiday, which is a continual anxiety, and, as the poor man feels, an unwarrantable expense.

In the whole of his married life he has never before seen so much of his children, and he never—heaven forgive him!—wants to see so much of them again. He is tired of the objectless days passed in the unexciting society of the wife of his bosom and of his numerous progeny. On the whole, he wishes the holiday were over, and he back at business once again; while Materfamilias wages war with the landlady, and is pathetic concerning the price of meat.

There are the young ladies from No. 7, who will go out in the yacht twice a day, together with a friend, who has invariably to be relanded, if the sea proves rough, amidst the pity of the passengers and the secret maledictions of the crew. There is young Tomkins, the corn-factor, taking great airs upon himself, walking in sand-boots along the Parade, and staring in the face of every woman he meets; there is his future father-in-law, driving out his better-half in one

of those pony-carriages that are a cross between a clothes and a plate basket, and charioteering the safest and most docile of ponies, who could not run away if he would—as Alexander might have been supposed to manage Bucephalus, had that animal ever been harnessed to a modern dog-cart. In all Hastings there is nothing more amusing than to watch these amateur whips, who hold the reins wide apart, and with great skill manage to keep a firm grasp on the whip at the same time.

No young blood tooling his four-in-hand along the high road ever felt grander than a regular cockney at Hastings seated behind a slowly-trotting pony *en route* to Crowhurst.

I have often wondered what the ponies say to each other about their hirers when they get back to their chaff and their oats at night. Do they take any part of the hauling and mauling out in sneers and sarcasms?—do they curse the day when basket-carriages were invented?—do they make lamentation over their weary legs and roughly-handled mouths?—do they tell about

how they are cantered up hill and rattled down ?—do they scoff at the hundred weights of flesh they have had to pull about ?—do they recount their experiences, and do they, as a rule, consider mankind a mistake ?

And as for the riding-horses—for the galled backs, for the broken winds—for the way they are mauled about, and pulled from side to side and harassed with curbs—and men who do not know what to do with either bridle or whip—and women who will hang on their crutches—and equestrians generally, who seem to think horses machines, incapable of weariness or aching bones—what shall we say of all this ?—what of the great people who drive about in their own carriages, languidly surveying the commonalty through eye-glasses ?—what of the little people who walk up and down for hours and go to the beach to pick up shells, and sit on the benches and listen to the music ?—what of the lonely men and the solitary women ?—what of the excursionists who come down from London to stay for

one day, and are taken back at a single fare, and who eat more apples, pears, and plums, and drink more beer in that time than an inexperienced person might deem possible?—what of the nobles who come down here, for any purpose, as it would seem, judging from their faces, save pleasure?—what of the snobs, who ape the airs of the nobles, and enjoy themselves little accordingly?—what of the lawyer you have known so well in London, who mounts to the very top of the East Cliff, and lies down on the grass there, far away from men and the noise thereof—lies down, not to think, or to look, or to dream, but to rest!—what of the invalid, who gazes out from shaded window at the changing groups upon the shore?—what of the children and the nursemaids, of the lovers and the newly married, of the childless and the widowed? What? Dear reader, go to Hastings, and look upon them all for yourself; go, as Mrs. Stondon did, and yourself a dispassionate observer, look over the throng.

It was in the height of the season that Phemie

found herself in Hastings once again, and the waves broke against the Parade, and the sea kept up its perpetual murmur, and the wind went sobbing away out upon the waters just as she could remember it doing in the days that were gone.

She did not come to Hastings as a visitor. She took no furnished apartments. She had to listen to no dissertations on the subject of plate, linen, and boot-cleaning. She was in Hastings for a purpose, not for any pleasure. She had come quickly, and she meant to return without delay ; for which reasons she and Mr. Aggland took up their quarters at the hotel which stands at the east end of Robertson Terrace.

Seated by the window, straining her eyes out over the sea, Phemie went back over the years that had elapsed since she first beheld the Castle, the Parade, the East and West Cliffs.

She had come to Hastings to see an old friend who was mixed up with every sad memory of her life. Of all places Hastings was, perhaps, the one she would most have shrunk from revisiting ;

but necessity is a hard taskmaster, and necessity had brought Mrs. Stondon back to the sea, to the visitors, to the music, to the moonlight once again.

She wanted to see Miss Derno. On her arrival at Roundwood, immediately after her hurried departure from Marshlands, her first act was to inquire at what time the post went out; her next to write a letter.

Writing letters being an employment to which, at this present age of the world, men and women are much addicted, the fact of Phemie inditing an epistle before she rested or refreshed herself would scarcely be worth mentioning, had it not chanced that the missive in question was one over which she wept many tears and breathed many sighs.

It was a confession that she had been wrong, that she had been guilty of grievous injustice; it contained expressions of deep regret; it concluded with an earnest prayer for forgiveness.

In the main Phemie was of a just and a

generous nature. She never spared herself, and she could not let the sun set, after her discovery of Basil's marriage, till she acknowledged that Miss Derno's suspicions of Georgina had been correct, that her own suspicions of Miss Derno had been wrong.

She had let Basil Stondon come between her and everything she most esteemed and valued ; between herself and her husband ; between herself and her family and her friends ; between herself and purity ; between herself and God.

And fully aware of all this, in her deep self-abasement, in the first agony of her mortified pride and vanity, with the first smart of the dreadful wound spurring her on, with the past spread open before her like a book, Phemie wrote such a letter to her old friend as caused Miss Derno, when at length it reached her, to mourn with an exceeding sorrow for the misery of the woman whom she had first met so young, so guileless, so shy and unsophisticated.

She had always loved Phemie ; loved her spite

of her faults, her whims, her injustice, her variableness; and she tried, when she answered the letter, to convey some assurance of this love to Mrs. Stondon.

The letter had been forwarded to her by Mrs. Hurlford. She said—"I would have answered it in person, but I am ill, dear, and I cannot go to you. I hear your health is far from good, or I would pray you to come and see me. If you are strong enough to travel here, I should like to see you, as it is scarcely probable I shall ever be able to leave Hastings again."

That was the errand which brought Mrs. Stondon to Hastings, to see her old friend, to look in her face, and touch her hand once more. That! Phemie sat and thought about it, till at length, turning to her uncle, she said—

"I think she must be back by this time. Shall we go and see?"

He took his hat in silence, and they passed out of the hotel side by side. The radiant beauty of old was gone, and yet many a man



turned to look after the fair widow as she swept along the Parade, turning her eyes neither to right nor to left, but looking straight forward, like one who sees something away in the indefinite distance.

They had inquired at the house in Robertson Terrace where Miss Derno lived, if she were come in, but the servant said she had not yet returned.

“Very likely, ma’am, she is on the Parade. She generally goes out about this time in a Bath-chair, to listen to the music and to watch the tide coming in.”

Along the Parade, therefore, Phemie walked, as I have said, with her black dress trailing behind her, with her eyes fixed on every advancing group, on every approaching figure.

There had been a time when on that same Parade she felt dreamily, dangerously happy; and as she walked along, the past was very present with her, and the woman’s heart bled, remembering the sweetness of the hours gone

by, and contrasting that sweetness with the bitterness of the hours which were then passing.

Lonely and widowed, childless and deserted, with the man who had loved her so truly dead, with the man whom she had loved so passionately married to another woman, whose son would hereafter be master of Marshlands—no wonder that the people who looked admiringly at Phemie's stately walk, and turned back for another glance at her queenly figure, felt instinctively that the widow's dress, that the sweeping garments, covered a sorrowful story; that the new comer had wept bitter tears, kept weary vigils, passed through much sorrow, and seen bitter suffering.

She was an old actor now on the stage which she had once regarded from afar off as a mere spectator; she had gone through the tragedy, she had played out the most important scenes in her own life, and she listened to the moaning and murmuring of the sea with a comprehension clear and distinct of its meaning.

She felt that although she might still have to

appear on the boards of existence, and act in other men's pieces, appear in the comedies and tragedies of other people's lives, still that her own was over.

At thirty her spring-time and her summer were gone. They had not been sunshiny or genial seasons to her; and the early blossoms which might have brought forth fruit in the autumn had died away and withered and rotted, and the rain had beaten down her roses, and withered the buds of promise, and cankered the root of every pleasant flower.

Her wounds were fresh, and Phemie felt them opening again with every step she took. There was not a foot of all that place but she knew and loved. There was not a spot of ground round which there did not hover some memory of the olden time. She could remember the airs and the waltzes they had listened to in the days before Basil went over the sea. She could recollect where they sat watching the waves come rushing up on the shore; the sight of the East

Cliff standing out against the sky affected her like a sudden pain.

She had rejoiced here and she had lamented—she had been happy while he walked by her side—she had hearkened to the moaning of the sea—to the voices of the night when they came evening after evening and spoke to her—through the whole of the winter she passed at Hastings with her husband—about the depths wherein she then thought Basil was lying.

Was his death one half so bitter as his resurrection? Was it not easier for her to mourn him dead than behold him lost to her? Yet—no—no—the woman's love was stronger than the woman's pride. Life for him—life at any price—at any suffering to herself. He would be happy and she could bear; and she looked out seaward as she thought this, and the waves came murmuring gently up on the shore—gently and peacefully.

“Phemie, I think this is Miss Derno.”

It was Mr. Aggland who spoke, pointing to a

lady seated in an invalid-chair, which was turned so as to catch the rays of the setting sun, that were streaming over town and castle, over cliff and sea.

"Miss Derno—surely not!" exclaimed Phemie, "That skeleton Miss Derno!" And she went forward doubtingly, and looked in the sick woman's face.

"Mrs. Stondon!"—"Miss Derno!"—they exclaimed at the same moment, and the two had met once more.

That was no place for loving greeting, for tender inquiry, for affectionate discourse; and it was not till Miss Derno had been wheeled back to her lodgings, and, assisted by a gentleman who was introduced to Mrs. Stondon as Major Morrice, had walked into the house, that the friends could speak to one another—heart to heart, and soul to soul.

"Forgive me, dear!"—that was the burden of Phemie's entreaty.

"I have nothing to forgive," was the reply;

"and I am so glad—so glad to see you again—to have you near me before I go."

"You are not dangerously ill though, darling, are you?"

"Mrs. Stondon"—Miss Derno raised the head which was resting in her lap, and bade Phemie look in her face—"do you think I am much like a woman who has long to live?" she asked, earnestly. "And I have so wished to live—so wished it, God forgive me."

Then in the quiet twilight, while the sound of voices floated to them from the Parade—while the music rose and fell—while the visitors walked up and down—while the feet of many people hurried by—while the moon rose over the East Cliff—while the waves came washing up on the shore, and the sound of the waters fell on the ear like a subdued accompaniment to the noisy melody of human fears and hopes which was still being sung on the strand, just the same as formerly, Miss Derno told the story of her life to Phemie.

It was the old story of a mutual love which yet could not end in marriage—of a rich father desirous that his only son should marry well, and unwilling for him to choose beauty and goodness and youth when money formed no part of the lady's dower.

It was the old story of the girl who would not endanger her lover's worldly prosperity—who would not let him be pauperised for her sake.

It was the old story of rings exchanged, of vows breathed, of an engagement entered into, of eternal constancy promised—then they parted. He went to India, she remained with her aunt.

After that there was foul play; she was represented to her lover as faithless, as married, as happy.

"My letters never reached him, his letters never reached me," she proceeded; "and though I knew, though I was confident there had been treachery somewhere, still I could not go on writing when I got no reply. A woman cannot force herself on a man," said Miss Derno, with a

slight return of the light, easy manner which Phemie had so much admired in former days. "Even if she believes he wants her, it is a difficult matter for her to press so valuable a possession on his acceptance—I could not, at all events. How was I to know the falsehoods he was told concerning me, and unknowing, I argued, 'If he wants me he will come back for me; he will come back some day.' And he has come back," she finished, "to find me the wreck you see."

"Was Major Morrice then——?" began Phemie.

"He was my first love and my last," said the dying woman, and the tears came into her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she spoke. "I could have married often," she went on. "I say it in no spirit of idle vanity, but merely to show that I did not remain faithful, as many a woman does, simply because she has had no chance of being otherwise than faithful—I could have married often, I could have married well, as the world

talks about such things, but the love of my youth was the love of my life, and I could take no second love into my heart for ever. He has never been in England since we were parted till now. He would not have come back yet, only that his father is dead, and there were many things requiring his presence. He returned at the same time as Basil Stondon; they were fellow-passengers in the steamer, and they landed together at Southampton. From Basil he heard I was not married, that I had always remained true, and he came to me here—came to pray me at last to be his wife. Think of it—think after the years of waiting, and to have to die and leave him.”

She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud, while Phemie said, gently—

“And can nothing——”

“Nothing can save me,” added Miss Derno, completing her friend’s sentence, “and I am not going to fight against the unconquerable—I am not going to try to avert the inevitable. Nothing worse can come to me than the look I saw on

Gordon Morrice's face when we first met. My fate was reflected there as in a glass. He has learned to disguise his thoughts since that—to speak hopefully of the future, but I know—I know——”

And she turned her head towards the window, and looked out at the groups standing on the Parade, at the young girls walking up and down, squired by attentive cavaliers. Her life had been full like theirs once—full of bliss and joy and happiness—full as the tide at its highest; but now the waves were ebbing, ebbing, leaving the sands of time, receding from the green shores of earth, rolling back—slowly, surely—into the depths of the mysterious sea.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LAST ENEMY.

It did not require any very great amount of pressing to induce Miss Derno to exchange her lodgings in Robertson Terrace for rooms at Roundwood. She was ready enough to make the attempt, at all events, for there is something in human nature which rebels at the idea of dying among strangers, and paying extra rent for a death.

"I shall only be a burden and a trouble to you," she said, in answer to Phemie, "only be a nuisance in your house—you had better leave me where I am." But still her eyes belied her lips; they looked wistfully at Mrs. Stondon, while she replied—

"I had not better leave you, and I will not. It is but little I can do for you now, but let me have the satisfaction of doing that little. Say you will come—it is all I ask, we will manage everything else, if only you can bear to leave Hastings and come with us."

"But I have so many belongings," hesitated the other; "my cousin, and maid, and—and—have you mentioned the matter to Major Morrice?"

"Yes, and he has agreed to make Roundwood his head-quarters for the present too," answered Phemie, cheerfully; but as she said this, Miss Derno looked first in the sweet face bent down over her, and then turned away and sighed.

Would it ever come to that?—when she was lying cold and dead—would Gordon Morrice grow in time to love Phemie, and would Phemie learn to love him? The possibility of such a result flashed upon the poor invalid's mind in a moment; and if tears did blind her eyes, who can wonder?

She had loved the man, and he could never be

anything to her now ; but another might be much to him, and if that other should be Mrs. Stondon, why better Mrs. Stondon than anyone else, for then her memory would not quite pass away ; they would think of her sometimes in the quiet eventide—remember the woman who had loved them both.

There is many an idea that seems unpleasant enough at first, which yet grows, as time passes by, familiar and agreeable ; the face of a possible contingency appears strange when it looks in suddenly through the windows of our soul, but by degrees that strangeness wears off, and we become accustomed to its presence, and should miss it were it to leave its wonted place.

Our plans and our ideas come to seem to us finally like friends ; we sketch them, we fill them in, we add a touch here, make some improvement there, and then, when we have finished and perfected them, we cannot bear to part with our ideals—cannot endure that the touch of reality should level our dream-castles with the ground.

Miss Derno found this to be the truth, at any rate. At first the idea of Phemie and Gordon Morrice growing near and dear to one another disturbed and troubled her; but as the days went by—as she beheld the objectless routine of Mrs. Stondon's life—as she saw how the sorrows she had passed through were graven on her heart—how deep the iron had entered into her soul; as she watched her flitting hither and thither, anticipating every want of her sick visitor, and moving heaven and earth to compass her recovery, Miss Derno began to hope—she who had done with hope in this world for herself—that some day Phemie might marry Gordon Morrice, and put the irremediable past, with its sin, its suffering, its repentance, away from her like a garment which, having been worn, is laid aside for ever.

That Phemie should not marry again—that in the very prime of her life she should thrust hope and love and joy aside—that she should live for other people's children, and preside over a desolate and lonely household, seemed to Miss Derno

terrible, and she took many an occasion to talk to Mrs. Stondon about the past and about the future, trying her mind on various subjects, but finding that only two strings in the instrument returned their full tone to her delicate touch.

She would speak fully about the past, about her husband, about—well, there is no use in standing over nice in the terms one employs—her lover; repentance, and affection; her regret for her husband, her regard for Basil.

“Why should I tell you any falsehood about the matter?” Phemie said, one day; “it is all dead and gone—the love, the shame, the struggle, the remorse. I did love Basil Stondon, but I love him no longer; the moment I saw his wife I was cured, and being cured, I wonder how any man can love another man’s wife. I could not love another woman’s husband. I could not,” she repeated, seeing a look of incredulity in Miss Derno’s face.

“And yet you say you have done with life?”

“What has that to do with the matter?”

: "Much. No person has done with life till he has met with some fatal disappointment in it. If you shut yourself up here, seeing no one, visiting no one, receiving no one, not even your intimate acquaintances—both Basil and his wife will be apt to think you are a disappointed woman, and after a while the world may think so too."

: "What would you have me do?" Phemie inquired.

"I would have you act as if your life were before, not behind you; as though there were still some happiness left in existence, even though Basil be married, and Georgina mistress of Marshlands. I would not have you leave the world and take a kind of social veil, burying yourself among these cousins of yours, and forgetting that a woman of property has scarcely a right to reside in such strict privacy as you propose. When your time of mourning is over, go out, see people, visit, take an interest in what is going on around you, and you will find



as the years pass that happiness comes with occupation, and that the worst remedy in the world for a wound is always to be keeping your hands upon it and pulling the sore open."

"I have occupied myself," Phemie answered. "I have planned schools. I have visited the poor. I have relieved the sick. I have devoted myself to my family."

"My dear Mrs. Stondon, you must do more. You must amuse yourself. You must devote yourself to the good work of getting strong, mentally and bodily; of taking joy out of the days as they come and go; of being interested—really interested—in your fellows. Do it at first from pride. Put it out of anyone's power to say Mrs. Stondon is a broken-hearted and a disappointed woman."

"That can never be said with any truth of me," answered Phemie, "for I am not disappointed, and I am not broken-hearted; and if Basil had never seen Georgina Hurlford, it would not have made any difference between us. After

that—after that letter, I would never marry any one—I never would.” And Phemie covered her face with her hands, and sobbed aloud.

“What letter are you talking about?” asked Miss Derno.

“I am talking of the one my husband left for me. I will show it to you. I have never shown it before to any person.” And Mrs. Stondon rose and left the room, returning in a few minutes, however, with the letter, which has previously been copied into these pages.

“Read that,” she said, “and never speak again as if I could marry a second time. Oh! if I had but known; if I had but known!”

If she had but known! Ah, Phemie, not alone by you have those words been spoken. Tremblingly, despairingly, when it was too late, white lips have murmured that sentence—faltering tongues uttered it hopelessly.

If she had but known! Is not that the burden of most human lamentations, of most mortal regret? What might we not all, men and

women alike, have made of our lives, which are now past and gone, squandered and lost to us, if we had but known—oh, God ! if we had but known !

Silently Miss Derno folded up the letter and gave it back to her friend. Quietly and thoughtfully she looked out at the landscape which lay before her, clad in its autumn robes of gold and russet, of red and brown, then she said—

“Dear Phemie—let me call you Phemie—if he could speak to you now, he would bid you be happy ; and you will try to be happy for our sakes—for his and for mine—for love of your dead husband and your dead friend.”

“I will try.”

“And supposing, Phemie, that in the future some good and faithful man should come, praying you to be his wife, and that you hesitate whether to say yea or nay, will you think of this letter and of me, and remember that both told you it would be no treachery to those you loved in the past for you to be happy in the future ?”

Then in a moment Phemie's grief broke out again.

"You will have it, then?" she said. "Well, then, you shall, only never mention the matter to me more. If I had loved less, I should have suffered less. Basil Stondon was so dear to me, that no man could ever win my heart again. This is the simple truth; and it is the truth, also, that I would not marry Basil Stondon were he single to-morrow, and came praying to me—praying as——"

She could not finish her sentence. The memory of all he had prayed—of the grief he had tried to bring upon her—of all the shame he had striven in his selfish recklessness to compass—rushed in a full tide through Phemie's heart, and choked her utterance.

"She will think differently some day," Miss Derno mentally argued; but the sick woman felt disappointed, nevertheless. She would have liked to join their hands, to speak out fully to both of them, to bid them be happy, yet not quite for-



getful of her, and then, as such was God's will, to go.

It was not to be, however; though Phemie grew to like Major Morrice greatly, though he learned to watch her coming and going and made such inquiries as induced Miss Derno to believe he suspected the truth, so far at least as Basil Stondon was concerned—it was not to be. The sick woman's disease went on apace, but never a bit nearer to one another came the pair. The months went by—it was the dead time of the year, the days were dull and dark, and the roll of the sea as it came in on the shore could be heard all the night long at Roundwood. There were many storms, and it was a trying season altogether—trying even to those in health, to the dwellers in great cities, and doubly trying to the ailing and dying far away in the country, who had nothing to do save think about their ailments, and nothing to look at save nature dressed in her deepest suit of mourning.

At last the year turned: and one day,

when the sun came struggling forth, Phemie said—

“We shall soon have spring here.”

“I wish I might live to see it—oh, I wish I might,” answered Miss Derno.

“Why, surely, dear, you have no expectation of leaving us so soon?” Mrs. Stondon began; but a look in her friend’s face made her stop and hesitate. “I had hoped,” she went on, “that the mild weather would do you good—that we perhaps might go abroad—and——”

“Ah, Phemie love, you must go abroad alone; only I wish I might live till the spring. I think I should go away more certain about the next world if I could only once again see the flowers springing and the leaves budding in this.”

Greatly Miss Derno took, in those days, to Mr. Aggland. He could supply her with a verse or an extract at any instant. He had the whole Bible almost off by heart, and was able to finish out whatever thought was trembling through her mind with text and quotation,

Sometimes Phemie would say, half-reproachfully, "I think you like better to have my uncle with you than me." To which Miss Derno was wont to reply,

"You know you do not believe what you are saying ; but still it is very pleasant to have everything put into shape for one in a moment. There is not a thought crosses my mind, not a doubt perplexes me, but I find the same thought has occupied and the same doubt perplexed some other human being long before I was born. Your uncle makes me not feel so lonely in my mind, Phemie—that is the secret of my liking to have him near me."

And it was but natural that this should be so—that the texts, the quotations, the scraps of poetry, the verses of pathetic songs should, as Miss Derno said, render the mental road she was travelling less solitary and weary.

Long time had passed since Mr. Aggland led the quire at Tordale, and his voice was not so true or full as formerly ; but still, in the even-

ings, the invalid loved to lie and listen to the hymns and the songs with which his memory was stored.

It is one thing to hear religious and serious subjects spoken of at great length, till the brain grows weary and the mind wandering—to have a full meal forced upon weak digestion at stated intervals—and another to have the cup of refreshment touch the lips whenever they are parched and feverish.

When there is too much thrust upon the patient the power of assimilation ceases, and the food which was intended to nourish turns to poison in the system; and, more especially when the act of dying is spread over a long period, the sufferer wearies of the constant recurrence to spiritual topics and longs for rest—longs for time to think out one fact ere another is placed before him for consideration.

This was Miss Derno's case at all events. She could not have borne any one beside her who would constantly have been praying or constantly

reading. This excitement, beneficial doubtless in some cases, would have driven her distracted; but she loved to talk in the evenings to Mr. Aggland on those subjects which had always dwelt next to his heart.

He had thought under the shadow of the everlasting hills about that land "where sorrow cometh never." Walking round his farm, he had reflected on many things besides wheat and turnips, sheep and harvest time. He had considered his life, and felt, though at the period Carlyle was as a sealed book to him, life was no idle dream, but a solemn reality—his own—all, as the great writer says, "he had to front Eternity with."

A man of this nature was just the person Miss Derno needed to be near her in the hour of her bitterest trial: one who could remind her that "God is better than his promise, if He takes from man a long lease and gives him a freehold of a greater value;" who never remained silent for lack of words, as so many of us do, but

could always fit in the right sentence in the right place; whose "mynde to him a kyngdome was," and who felt himself monarch over every idea it contained.

Who was more fitted to remind the dying woman that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever?" Who could better bring in the quotation, "Religion troubles you for an hour—it repays you by immortality?"

Did she shrink from the path before her—he was able to quote Moir—

"When spectral silence pointeth to decay,
How preacheth wisdom to the conscious breast?
Saying—'Each foot that roameth here shall rest.
To God and Heaven, Death is the only way.'"

Were she wavering and doubtful, he would say—

"Oh! my friend,
That your faith were as mine—that thou couldst see
Death still producing life, and evil still
Working its own destruction—couldst behold
The strifes and tumults of this troubled world
With the strong eye that sees the promised day
Dawn through this night of tempest."

He could assure her, when she felt loth to leave
the world—

“That there is nothing beautiful in this,
The passion'd soul has clasped—but shall partake
Its everlasting essence—not a scent
Of rain-drench'd flower, nor fleece of evening cloud
Which blended with a thought that rose to heaven,
Shall ever die.”

Never weary was he of talking about the fair
land where—

“Unbroken droop the laden boughs, with heavy fruitage bent;
Of incense and of odours strange, the air is redolent;
And neither sun, nor moon, nor stars dispense their changeful
light,
But the Lamb's eternal glory, makes the happy city bright.”

Never did he tire when his theme was of that
City “whose inhabitants no census has num-
bered; through whose streets rush no tides of
business; that city without grief or graves—sins
or sorrows; whose walls are salvation, and whose
gates are praise.”

Softly, in the firelight, while she leaned back
in her chair, and listened to his voice, he would
recite—

“ There is rest without ony travaille,
And there is pees without ony strife,
And there is bright sommer ever to see,
And there is never winter in that countrie,
And there is great melody of angels' songe,
And there is preysing Him amonge,
And there is alle manner friendship that may be,
And there is ever perfect love and charitie,
And there is wisdom without folye,
And there is honestie without vileneye.”

Was she timorous—“ Death,” he assured her,
“ is but a shadow from the rock eternity.”

But why multiply examples ? why go on to tell
at greater length how the whole burden of his
discourse was—

“ But since our souls' now sin-obscured light
Shines through the lanthorn of our flesh so bright ;
What sacred splendour will this star send forth
When it shall shine without this vail of Earth ? ”

She had to travel a darksome road, but he
brightened the way for her. He was so sure him-
self, concerning the certainty of the truths he
uttered, that it seemed impossible for her to
doubt. A man himself who had never much
regarded the ways, nor manners, nor fashions

of this present world, he was able to give her, who had lived in the world all her life, many hints as to where she was going astray, in what errors she was indulging.

He brought her the first snowdrop that put its head above ground; he searched all the banks and hedgerows for the "pale primrose;" he told her when and where the birds were building, and how many eggs there were in the blackbird's nest.

Well, she had her wish! She lived to touch snowdrops and primroses; to hear the birds singing, and see the trees putting forth; she lived till nature put off her winter clothing, and the sun shone over the earth once more; then——

"Gordon, I feel I shall soon have to go now," she said, one morning. "Thank you for staying with me to the last."

She put her arms round his neck, and drew his face down to hers.

"If all had gone well," she whispered, "we should now have been man and wife for sixteen

years. I wonder would that have made this parting any easier?"

Over and over and over again Major Morrice kissed her, but it was a minute before he could steady his voice sufficiently to answer—

"You know I wanted you to be my wife even at the end."

"I know it," she sighed; "but Gordon, if you marry, as I hope you may, you will not feel it so hard to put another in the place I did not quite fill, as——"

"Oh, my love, my love! was it for my sake you refused?" and the man's tears fell upon her like rain; "as if I could ever put another in your place; as though my life were not over to all intents and purposes now."

"I want Phemie," was the only answer she made, and Phemie drew near. "You will be friends when I am gone," she went on, speaking thickly and with difficulty. "You will not grow to be quite strangers to one another as time goes by. You will let Gordon talk about me to you,

won't you, dearest. And Gordon," he stooped his head, and Phemie drew back—"if ever you think—in time—do not let any thought of me—remember I wished——"

Fortunate was it for Phemie that she had no idea of what caused Major Morrice's face to flush so painfully in an instant—what made him look aside as she arranged the pillows for her who would so soon have done with earth—for her who was passing swiftly to that land where no kindly offices avail—where love, and tenderness, and regret, and unselfishness are equally useless and vain.

All the day long they never left her; all the day long she lay waiting for death to come, and it was quite evening ere she went.

Beside her were some flowers, fresh gathered in the morning, withered and dying.

"The flower fadeth," she said, feebly, turning towards Mr. Aggland; and, answering her thoughts, he answered—

"But the word of our God shall stand for

ever." A few minutes more and it was all over.

"Comfort him for me, Phemie," were her last words ; and with her hand clasped in that of the man she had loved so faithfully, she fell asleep.

She lived, as she had desired, till the flowers sprang and the trees budded ; and she left this world certain about the next.

"The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death," said Mr. Agglan, thoughtfully, as he lingeringly left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

OLD FRIENDS AND OLD PLACES.

TIME went by, and still [Phemie remained unmarried.

Suitors had come, and suitors had gone ; but to each and all the widow's answer was the same. She would never take a second husband. And so time went on, and she was still, as I have said, unmarried.

But the years had in other respects worked great changes in her. She was not the Phemie we have seen in the pages that have been written. She was outwardly a changed Phemie ; a woman who, finding that neither work nor solitude availed to bring her peace, went in for distraction, and was to be met with at every concert, flower-show, pic-nic, what you will.

It was Duncan Aggland who had greatly contributed to bring about this alteration ; Duncan, who, seeming to imagine he owned a kind of reversionary interest in his cousin, had wanted her to cast her fortunes with his, and when she declined to do so, remarked that she was staying single for the sake of Basil Stondon—that he knew she was, and that everybody said (oh ! the horror of that everybody) no young woman would mew herself up at Roundwood as she did if she had not been disappointed by some one ; and that further, he (the speaker) had not been so blind as perhaps she imagined to the state of affairs at Marshlands.

Mr. Duncan Aggland was very angry, or perhaps he would never have uttered such very disagreeable truths ; and, like all people who are angry, he got the worst of the encounter, for Phemie thanked him for his engaging frankness, and begged that for the future he would not consider Roundwood so much his home as formerly.

"Because," she finished, "I purpose taking a house in town, and I might see more of you then than would be at all agreeable if you continued to visit me as often as you have done."

"But I am doing so well, Phemie," he pleaded, becoming submissive in a moment. "I am to be taken into partnership next year, and——"

"No one can be more delighted to hear of your worldly advancement than I," broke in Phemie. "I am charmed to know you are doing so well, and I have not the least doubt of your ability to maintain a wife; but on principle I object to the marriage of cousins, and whomsoever I may choose hereafter to marry, be quite sure it will not be you."

"That is plain at any rate," said the young man.

"I meant it to be so," she answered; "obscurity can serve no good purpose on either side; you have made a mistake, that is all, and it would be unkind in me not to undeceive you. Now, good-bye, and when you meet with any one

you consider worthy to become Mrs. Duncan Aggland, I, as the female head of your family, shall be most happy to call upon her." With which speech, Mrs. Stondon dismissed her admirer, and from that day forth devoted herself, so far as any mere observer could discover, heart and soul to amusement and frivolity.

People who had seen the widow during her time of mourning marvelled to behold her, when that time was over, emerging from her seclusion, accepting all invitations, appearing here and there and everywhere, seeming to care very little what was thought about her, providing only she could pass the time and make the hours fly quicker.

"What a flirt that woman is," some one said, casually, to Basil Stondon, when speaking of his relative.

"Yes," thought Basil, as he walked home, "what a flirt! Hang her, she never was anything but a flirt. If she had, my life might have been a different one."

So, when men stumble over a pebble they are apt to blame the pebble instead of their own stupidity ; so, when they fall into a hole they are in the habit of anathematising the hole for being there instead of their own blindness which was unable to see it ; and so on precisely the same principle Basil accused Phemie of causing misfortunes which had been brought about entirely by himself.

As for the life she led—the heartless, purposeless, unsatisfying life—what can we say but this, that there are some people who when they are in trouble take to dram-drinking, while others prefer opium ; and in like manner there are men and women who mentally seek the oblivion of excitement, while others court the deadening monotony of seclusion. Which is worst—providing the patient must run to either extreme—to one the wine cup, or to another the opium ? They are both so injurious, you answer, that it would be impossible to make a choice, and yet for Phemie I think the intoxication of society

was the least hurtful of the twain. To a temperament like hers—secure against disappointment, against love, against expectations that could never be realised—excitement was surely less fatal than inaction, the round of gaiety than the round of endurance.

The world was, as usual, critical and not over kind in its remarks upon her: some people saying she was seeking for a coronet, others that a title would content her, even if the title were no higher than that of baronet.

As to her views and wishes, if she had any, all her own relatives were at fault, even Mr. Aggland, who only once ventured to say—

“ Be cautious, my dear, remember,
That lovely face will fail ;
Beauty's sweet—but beauty's frail—
'Tis sooner past—'tis sooner done,
Than summer's rain or summer's sun
Most fleeting when it is most dear,
'Tis gone while we but say 'tis here.”

To which Phemie answered by putting her hand over his mouth, and saying—

“ Ah, uncle, it went long ago; no need to

remind me of how fast youth and beauty pass away."

They were rather unique, this uncle and niece, and much sought after in London society accordingly. Every grace of manner, every art and conventionality Mrs. Stondon had acquired so dearly, she put forth now to win her popularity and regard.

Her little affectations were brought out once again—brought out and aired after years. She fenced, she rallied, she retorted, she laughed, she looked grave, according to the rules she had taken so much trouble to learn.

Well, well, life is strange, and women are the strangest part of life, and Phemie could not have given a reason for what she did save this, that she hoped some day to meet Basil Stondon and his wife in society, and astonish them with her cold bright wit, her unimpassioned manner, her worldly ideas, and her unromantic views of life.

And so the years went on, as I have said, and still there was only one suitor who hung back,

one man who felt that a woman like this was not calculated to make his life happy, his home a peaceful one.

Obedient to the last request her lips had framed, Major Morrice never through the years lost sight of his dead love's friend, but visited her, talked with her, walked with her, and had been so near proposing many times that the world had almost ground for its gossip when it said at last they were engaged.

Never, however, even within sight of that shore came they : the woman was serious—she really did not intend to marry again. When her friends fancied she was in jest, she spoke in sober earnest.

Had she been as one of those with whom she was associating, she might have buried not one but twenty husbands, and assisted at the obsequies of the last with cheerful resignation. But life with its sorrows, was an earnest affair to Phemie, and its troubles were matters of serious import to her.

"I suppose you think I like this whirl," she said, one day, to Major Morrice; and he answered

"It is impossible for me to think otherwise, seeing how thoroughly you seem to enjoy it."

"One must live," Mrs. Stondon asserted, a little defiantly.

"True; but is it necessary always to live in public?" he replied.

"It is to me," she said; "it is to me."

"Would it be impertinent if I asked why?" and he spoke with a tone of pity in his voice such as Phemie had not heard previously in the voice of any one unconnected with her by blood or kinship.

"Because I have no home ties," she returned; "because I have neither father nor mother, brother nor sister, husband nor children; because I am lonely—lonely beyond all power of description. There, you have made me talk about myself; now forget me. Let us talk about something else."

"May I talk about myself?" he asked, drawing a little nearer to her.

"Yes; that is always a welcome topic," she answered. And he went on—

"I, too, am lonely in the world. Why should we not cast our loneliness together. Will you take me—knowing all the past—for your husband? I will strive to prove myself worthy of the trust——"

She was astonished—too much astonished perhaps at first to answer; but at last she slowly said—

"Major Morrice, you do not know what you are saying; you do not know what you are asking——"

"I am praying you to be my wife," he replied. "Having loved your friend as far as man can love, I am beseeching her friend to make me happy."

She laid her hand on his shoulder, and looked steadily in his face while she answered—

“Major Morrice, you may know how much the past has taken from me when I say I cannot accept a husband even like you. I think I may truly affirm that I love and honour you more than any man on earth ; but I cannot marry you. I would not give one like you the mere husk of a love out of which the heart was eaten long and long ago.”

Very tenderly he talked to her, but it was of no use. Very earnestly he pleaded that he had affection enough and to spare for both. Phemie was resolute.

“You are worthy a better fate,” she said. “I have done harm enough in my life, let me be fair and true and honest now.”

And she was all these, though it may have been that for the moment she felt tempted to flee from the awful loneliness of her purposeless existence—from the cold selfishness of the world to the warmth and the welcome of his love.

But it was not to be—it was never to be. She had toiled for her wages in the years which were

gone, and her wages were now being paid to her by no niggardly hand.

That which we contract for we must fulfil—that which we agree blindly, or with our eyes open, to receive, we must content ourselves withal.

“The wages of sin is death.” She had sinned, and death fell on every blade of grass near her—on every shrub—on every flower.

It was the summer time, and a great longing came over her to see the hills and the mountains and the valleys and the wild dale country once more.

“I should like to go to Cumberland for a month,” she said, one day; and accordingly she and her uncle and Helen set forth together on that long northern journey which wearied Phemie even before she reached the old “Salutation” Inn, which has greeted so many a tourist entering the Lake District.

But, spite of her weariness, she could not rest in the hotel. Tired and exhausted, Helen went

off to bed, while Mr. Aggland and his niece walked along the road which leads from Amble-side to Rydal.

They walked in silence; he was busy with his thoughts, she with hers. They had come back to the old country again, though not to the old place. They had crossed the frontier and passed out of the flat, rich southern lands into the lake district, where mountains rose to the sky and streams came down the hill sides; and the traveller, wandering solitary over the fells, heard the plash of distant waterfalls alone breaking the desolate silence.

They had come back from the bustle of great towns, from intercourse with many men, from the life which always grows more rapid and more exciting the nearer people draw towards London—to the old quiet home, to the tarns, to the heather, to the mountains, to the valleys, which were all the same as when Phemie had dwelt among them, the adopted daughter of the owner of the Hill Farm.

She had left the wild mountain country when the sun was shining brightly; in the noontide, in the light; she returned to walk through it once more, but the grey evening shadows were settling down over the landscape, as the shadows had settled upon her life. She left it to become a great lady, and she had achieved that object. She had gained wealth and position, and she was now wondering, as she looked to right and left, what wealth and position availed.

They walked on, and the pure sweet air coming down from among the hills seemed to put fresh life into her, to restore something of the elasticity of her youth. Side by side, still in silence, they passed by Rydal Hill, through Rydal village, and so on till they came within sight of a house which most tourists in that part of England must have paused to admire. It is a cottage set back a little from the road, looking over Rydal Lake, with Nab Scar and Helm Crag overshadowing it, with the sweet greenery of that lovely country swelling away from it on all sides, with the

summer flowers giving forth their sweetest perfume around it, with climbers and creepers trailing over it—a delightful spot in which to live, a sad place in which to die.

There are nooks on the earth that seem too beautiful to leave ; there are seasons when everything in nature is so perfect, when her skies are so soft, her woods so leafy, her sunsets so gorgeous, her mornings so bright and gladsome, her streams so clear, her lakes so calm, her flowers and shrubs so fragrant, that it seems impossible for man to go away from all this beauty and brightness, to close his eyes on the face of this lovely world, and never to open them in time again.

Some thought of this kind came across Phemie's mind as she stood looking at the lake and the landscape, which now lay bathed and steeped in moonlight. For the first time for years she felt that there was a happiness in the mere fact of existence ; that no human being can have quite done with life so long as he remains in the flesh. It came upon her suddenly that she

had been wrong, that she had done wrong, in suffering herself to grow so weary of so beautiful a world ; and as out of the fulness of the heart the mouth speaketh, so out of her heart dropped the sentence,

“I think one might grow almost happy again, uncle, living in a place like this.”

Then they turned and retraced their steps, talking as they went, talking under the moonlight of many things about which they had held their peace for years; and it was getting late when they found themselves in Ambleside once more, and entering the Salutation, at the door of which hotel some excursionists were just alighting.

“Mother, and father, and children,” decided Phemie, as she passed them by; and she would have gone upstairs and thought no more of them but for a voice which she fancied she knew, exclaiming,

“Don’t run in so rudely, Harry; keep back, sir.” Whereupon at once the lady said, “You are always snubbing that boy, Basil.”

The person so addressed never turned to answer; he caught the child, who was rushing past Phemie, with one hand, while with the other he raised his hat and apologised for his son's forwardness.

"You need not apologise to me," answered Phemie; "we are too old friends to stand on ceremony." And she put out her hand and clasped his again after years—after years.

"Well, I declare," cried Mrs. Basil Stondon, while they all stood grouped together in the hall; "if this is not a pleasant surprise. Who would have thought of meeting you here?"

"There is nothing extraordinary in meeting me," Phemie answered; "the wonder is meeting you."

"It was a fancy of Basil's," that gentleman's wife replied. "He wanted to come north—and so we came north; we have been here, in Westmoreland I mean, ten days, and I for one was getting terribly sick of it; but now you are in the same place it will make a difference. It is so

horrid being among strangers, not having a soul one knows to speak to."

Phemie agreed that to be so placed must indeed be distressing; and they all adjourned upstairs, and having arranged to spend the evening together, the ladies took off their bonnets while the gentlemen ordered tea.

"And you positively look younger than when I saw you last," remarked Mrs. Basil Stondon, querulously; "but it is easy for you to look young: free from care and without children, and surrounded by every blessing and comfort, why should you not keep your beauty?"

"I have not kept it," answered Phemie, and she sighed as she spoke; though the past with its vanities, and its temptations, and its sorrows and its repentance seemed like a dream to her at the moment. "I have not kept it, and there is no reason why I should have kept it. Youth cannot stay with us for ever, Georgina; if it did, girls would have small chance of ever being either wooed or wed."

There was a little side blow in this sentence, and Georgina felt it. Her youth had helped her to secure Basil, a prize she often told him was scarcely worth the trouble, to which remark he had a habit of retorting—

“You did not think so at one time, at least, judging by the trouble you took,” for Basil never hesitated to remind his wife of the efforts she had made to win him, and was not over delicate about recapitulating to her all the advantages she had gained for herself by the match.

They lived such a life that the presence of any stranger seemed a relief; and accordingly both husband and wife eagerly pressed Mr. Aggland, and Phemie, and Helen to join them in their various excursions, and to make up parties for visiting Keswick, and Coniston, and Ullswater, and many a lovely spot much more accessible from Ambleside than those just enumerated.

Day after day they passed together, evening after evening they spent, talking in the moonlight or across the tea-table; but the more Phemie saw

of Basil and his wife, the more wretched she felt satisfied they were.

Georgina had not found the game all profit, and was disappointed in some way. Basil did not care for the woman he had married, and took no pains to conceal that the only creature for whom he now lived, and moved, and had his being, was Harry, his son and heir, whom his mother spoiled past redemption, and encouraged in all acts of disobedience and rebellion, possibly to annoy his father.

As for the little girl, she went to the wall entirely; neither father nor mother seemed to recognise her as belonging to the same species as Master Harry, who was for ever up to some mischief, and being perpetually called to account for his misdeeds by Basil, who "snubbed the child," so said his wife.

"And I do hope," exclaimed Georgina, when the day of separation came at last, "that you will come and spend a long time with me in Norfolk. It would be a real charity, for Basil is

scarcely ever in the house. He leaves me alone from morning till night. Now do come, will you?"

"Do you really wish me to come, Georgina?" asked Mrs. Stondon, who had latterly begun to doubt whether she heard and saw correctly. "Are you speaking honestly and truly, when you say you wish I would do so?"

"Honestly and truly, and there is my hand on it," laughed Georgina.

"And your husband?"

"Oh! my husband must answer for himself. I never presume to understand what may be the state of Basil's mind on any subject. If you wish him to invite you also, I will ask him to write you a letter requesting the honour, et cetera; but I should have thought my invitation sufficient. You are such a great lady now, though, there is no knowing how to deal with you."

"I will come," answered Phemie, suddenly, "sometime in the autumn, when the trees are looking their best."

"That is a dear good creature," remarked Mrs. Basil Stondon, mentally adding, "now that will drive Mrs. Montague away; and if I once get her out of the house, I will take precious good care she never enters it again."

From which speech it will be perceived that Georgina Stondon was not a particularly different individual from Georgina Hurlford, but rather that she was capable of planning and scheming a little still.

Late in the season Phemie returned to Roundwood; but she had not been long settled there before a letter arrived from Marshlands entreating her not to forget her promise, but to come as soon as ever she could, and bring her uncle with her.

His part of the performance Mr. Aggland emphatically declined, and he could not quite resist saying to his niece—

"Phemie, do you think it is right for you to go? Are you safe—are you strong—are you not

mad, think you, to fling yourself into such peril again?"

They were standing in the drawing-room at Roundwood as he spoke thus, he on one side of the centre table, she on the other; and the light of the wax candles fell full on her face as she remained for a moment silent ere she answered—

"I am safe—I am strong—and I am not mad—and I place myself in no peril. I am speaking the truth," she added, with a smile. "I have no feeling now for Basil Stondon except that of friendship and pity. Seeing him as he is—not as I fancied him, but as he actually is—has done more towards curing me than all my punishment—than all my resolution."

And she put her hand in his, and he felt that it did not tremble—that every finger lay passive—that every nerve seemed still.

"A woman's mind is one of the inscrutable mysteries of this earth to me," decided Mr. Aggland, as he thought over the puzzle of Phemie's conduct in his own apartment. "I reared that

woman—I watched her in childhood, girlhood—and best part of her womanhood I have spent by her side—and yet I know no more about her than if she were the greatest stranger upon earth. Well, she seems resolved to put herself in danger, but it is not my fault. Now, heaven and earth,” finished the perplexed philosopher, “is it?”

Down to Disley, Phemie travelled—over the old familiar ground the train swept on; and she took off her bonnet, and, drawing the blue curtain so as to shade her eyes from the glare of the light, looked out across the country just as she had done that day when she returned to Norfolk after her long sojourn abroad.

The fields were the same—the stations—the towns—the hedge-rows—the poplars. Everything seemed unchanged excepting herself.

There was a great hush in the still autumn afternoon — a strange quietness in the air. Phemie thought of that journey afterwards, and remembered how often a calm precedes a storm. She was travelling down into Norfolk, all un-



consciously, to fulfil a mission ; and as the train sped on she tried to account to herself for the desire she felt to revisit Marshlands and to spend a few weeks with Basil and his wife.

It was no love for Basil. She knew that. She had examined her heart, and found the idol in possession no longer. Her youth had gone, and the passionate attachment of her youth with it. And yet something remained—some tie of memory, or association, or affection, or pity, which was strong enough to bring the woman back to Marshlands—to the dear home where she had been so happy and so wretched.

There came a point in that journey, however—at Cambridge, I think—when Phemie, unable fully to analyse her own sensations, turned coward, and would fain have gone back again.

She dreaded the sight of the old place, of the familiar rooms, the resurrection of the thousand-and-one recollections. She did not know whether, after all, she could be quite brave when the pines and the elms appeared standing clear against the

sky as of yore. One by one the details of the picture which had been blurred and destroyed a little by the lapse of years came out clearly and distinctly before her view.

Only one thing she could not realise fully. Basil master of Marshlands, Georgina mistress, she herself their guest; children's voices echoing about the place, and those very children leaving their games and their amusements, their father and their mother, to come to her.

Was that the bait which lured the lonely woman back to her old home? I do not know how she could have blinded and deluded herself into ignorance on this point when she knew that the only gentle, womanly tears she had shed for years fell over the face of Basil's little girl.

She had never desired children—she had always held them away from her at arm's length, and yet now she would have liked to carry "Fairy," as she called her, back to Roundwood, whether for love of the little creature, or for love of its father, or simply because she wanted to

have something all to herself, who can say? Only one fact is certain—the only pleasant hours she passed in Marshlands were those when she and Fairy wandered about the grounds hand-in-hand—when the child came to her room and listened to story and legend and song—when the little feet came running to meet her, making sweet pattering music by the way—when the soft arms were stretched out to “Mamma Phemie,” to “dear, dear Mamma Phemie,” who came at last to the conclusion it was best for her to leave Marshlands before Basil saw what an idiot she had grown.

But Basil saw it all—saw how his children turned from his wife to the woman he still loved better than his wife, and he grew angry at Georgina for having asked Phemie to the house, and words at last waxed hot between them on the subject.

For ever and for ever they were quarrelling, so far as difference of opinion was concerned, and wrangling over their differences. Phemie's

presence or Phemie's absence signified little, only the quarrels became more vehement. Basil accused Georgina of striving to hurt and annoy him, Georgina declared that he had by his temper driven away every old acquaintance they possessed, and that she was determined to have somebody to speak to.

"If Mrs. Stondon were the devil," she remarked, with somewhat unladylike vehemence, "I would cultivate her. I mean to go and stay with her. I intend to be asked to her house in town, and I do not intend to live any longer with your mother."

"If you mean to have your own way in everything, then," retorted Basil, "you had better put in your list that you will have to live without me."

"That would be no loss—a decided gain," replied Georgina. And thus the battle terminated for the time, only to be resumed the next day about Harry, who, young though he was, should, his father declared, be sent to school forthwith,

unless his mother would have him kept out of the stable-yard, and away from the horse's heels.

"I tell you now what it is," said Basil, collecting all the men and women servants together, and addressing them *en masse*, "the first time I find Master Harry in the stables, or out about the grounds anywhere by himself, I will discharge you every one. Take this for notice, for by — I will keep my word."

"What a milksop you would make of the boy," sneered Mrs. Basil Stondon. "What must the servants think of you?"

"They cannot think less of me than I do of myself for ever having been such a cursed fool as to marry you," retorted Basil. Whereupon one word led, as usual, to more, and the quarrel terminated in Basil flinging a few things into a portmanteau and starting for a friend's house, as was his wont whenever matrimony and the cares thereof grew too much for him.

Fain would Phemie have followed his example and taken flight also, but Georgina entreated her

so earnestly to remain, that Mrs. Stondon yielded, and wrote to her uncle not to expect her at Roundwood for a week or ten days.

"Now I hope to heaven," was Mr. Aggland's secret thought, "she is not getting too fond of that place again, nor of its owner." And his hope was fulfilled.

Phemie had grown perfectly sick of the place, but she stayed on as a matter of kindness to Georgina, and perhaps, also, with some faint hope of opening the misguided woman's eyes, and making his home more comfortable for Basil.

"It is of no use talking," remarked Georgina, one morning; "he ought to have married you, that is the whole secret of the affair, and—and——" She turned her head sharply away, and Phemie heard her sob. She had packed the cards, she had won all she asked for, and this was the result—a wretched home, a neglectful husband, a cat and dog existence. How could Phemie help—spite of all the misery Georgina

had wrought her—feeling sorry for the unhappy wife?

“You might surely make a better thing of your life still,” she said, gently, “if you would only agree to bear and forbear; if you would only bring up Harry as his father wishes; if you would only just try for a little time, the effect of meeting his views instead of thwarting them, I am certain you might be a great deal more comfortable. I am confident Basil would pay back every concession with interest.”

“He would not,” she answered, slowly. “You may think you know Basil, but you do not. He has never forgiven me, and he never will. He might not have cared much for you had you been married to him, but as you were not, he thinks he only required you to make him the happiest man on earth. I thought I could have made him love me once,” she went on, speaking more rapidly; “but I was mistaken. The way to make a man like my husband hate you, is to belong to him. I ought not to show you what

an escape you had," she added ; "but I owe you a good turn for the bad one I did you when I was a girl ; and for all the rest, I have forgiven you long ago, I have indeed."

"You are very kind," answered Phemie ; "but I have not the slightest idea what you had to forgive."

"Have you not ? I may tell you some day, but not at present." And Georgina walked, as she spoke, to the window, opened it, and stepped out on the balcony mentioned in the earlier portion of this story.

She remained leaning over it for a few minutes, turning every now and then to address some sentence to Phemie, who stood behind her in the drawing-room. She talked much about Miss Derno, and how greatly she had disliked her, how firmly she had believed in her designs on Basil.

"I really thought at the time," she was proceeding, when she suddenly stopped.

"What—what is it ?" she broke out. "What

are they bringing? Mrs. Stondon—quick—look, do you see that?”

Phemie ran, at the words, into the balcony, and then as instantly left it, and rushed from the drawing-room, and out at the front door, and round the house, and through the shrubberies, to a point where she met the men who had attracted Georgina's attention.

“What is the matter?” she asked, with a quick look behind to see if Georgina were following. “What is it?” And the group parted in silence and let her look for herself.

Involuntarily she cried out, and the cry was repeated at her elbow by the wretched mother, who shrieked—

“I knew it was Harry. Bring him in and send for the doctor. Ride for your lives. Why do you all stand there doing nothing?” she went on fiercely, for the men never moved, but looked either down to the ground, or else each in his fellow's face. “Do you hear me? Go for the doctor. Give me my son.”

"Give him to me," Phemie said, and they put the child into her arms. His little hand dropped limp as they did so, and his head fell back.

"Ride for the doctor," Phemie ordered, "for your mistress." And she led the way into the house, carrying the dead heir of all those broad lands, of all that fine property, while the men lifted Georgina from the ground, where she had dropped, not absolutely fainting, but down in an incapable heap, and bore her in after the boy, for whose sake she had once forgotten her pain and her travail, and rejoiced that there was a man-child born into the world!

CHAPTER VIII.

PHEMIE'S JOURNEY.

FOR hours Mrs. Basil Stondon lay in that merciful stupor.

While tender and pitying hands dressed the child for his long sleep, dressed him all in white and left him on his little bed—while the servants went about the darkened house with quiet tread, and asked one another under their breath what their master would say, and whether they should all be dismissed, and if an inquest would have to be held—while the few remaining leaves on the elm trees fell one by one off the bare branches—while the late autumn day drew to its close—Georgina still lay without speaking a word, without moving hand or foot.

By her side Phemie sat thinking, not so much of the miserable mother or of the dead boy, but rather of what Basil would say—of how Basil would feel.

Once she went halfway down stairs intending to send a messenger for him; but long before she reached the bottom of the flight she changed her mind and ascended the broad stairs again.

Two or three times she took up a pen and drew paper and portfolio before her, thinking to write and break the news.

She began—"My dear Mr. Stondon," and tore that up; then she commenced, "Dear Basil," and tried to go on and tell him of the disaster that had happened.

But it would not do. When a person thinks, words flow like water; when he writes, they freeze on the paper; and Phemie tore up that epistle likewise.

Then she went and looked at the child—at the glory of golden hair—at the round smooth cheeks—at the body which had been so full of life and

health but a few hours before. He had been a troublesome imp when living—a restless, noisy, daring, unmanageable boy; but he was quiet enough now. He had been wont to push “Fairy” away from Phemie’s side, and to strike Phemie when she took his sister up in her arms and comforted her. There was not a dress in Mrs. Stondon’s wardrobe but bore testimony to the strength of Master Harry’s hands, but the child was quiet enough now; and when Phemie looked upon all that remained of Basil’s son—when she felt what he would feel when he came to look upon his dead also, she fell on her knees beside the boy, and her heart seemed to cry in spite of her own desire—“How will he bear it! how will he ever endure this sight!”

Any one entering that room would have imagined Phemie to be praying, as kneeling on the floor she remained with her arms stretched over the snowy sheet, and her head resting upon them; but in reality Phemie was not praying—she was thinking—going over the weary past—

traversing the old roads over again—wondering when the end would come, and what the end would be.

As she had suffered, was he to suffer? As she had wept, was he to weep? Had the hour for settlement come at last, and was this part of his temporal wages?

Sin! He had sinned, and while Phemie knelt there in the gathering darkness she recited to herself that story out of The Book which begins,—

“There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up.”

She never knew why that pathetic tale—so terribly pathetic that the sinner’s sin is almost forgotten in the sinner’s misery and humility—should come back to her memory then.

Was it for the sins of the father that the child which had been born unto Basil, and become to

him as the very apple of his eye, was taken away thus—the fruit of his body for the sin of his soul.

Was it? Phemie had enough of the old Covenanting spirit in her religion to say, in answer to her own question, “Lord, it is just;” and yet her softer, weaker, human nature trembled to think of that inexorable justice which seemed never to forget to remember sin—which seemed never weary of awarding punishment.

“O God, let me bear—let me;” and Phemie prayed at last. All the dross had been taken out of her nature, and I think she was pure and unselfish at that moment as the angels in heaven. “Punish him no further—but let me bear all;” and then she bethought her of the words of Solomon the son of David.

“If they sin against Thee (for there is no man that sinneth not), and Thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy; yet if they bethink themselves and repent, and make

supplication, saying,—We have done perversely ; we have committed wickedness : Then hear Thou in Heaven, and forgive the sin of Thy people.”

“Hear, O Lord,” Phemie added, and her tears fell hot and fast. “Hear and pity, and enable him to bear this trouble Thou hast laid upon him.”

“Who will tell Basil ?” she marvelled, as she rose from the ground—“who ?” And she wished her uncle were with her, feeling that he perhaps might have been the best bearer of bad tidings possible to find under the circumstances.

“I can telegraph for him at any rate,” she considered, and the idea gave her immediate relief.

He would advise and assist. There were a dozen things he could see to, and his presence would be a restraint—a man’s presence always was.

Phemie decided to send for him, and half-an-hour afterwards one of the Marshland servants

was galloping to Disley in order to despatch her telegram.

He had not been gone ten minutes, however, before Georgina spoke.

"Is it true?" she said, faintly; and Phemie answered, "It is true."

"He is dead, then?" and Mrs. Stondon replied, "Everything that could be done was done; but he never moved after the horse kicked him."

There ensued a silence; then the wife uttered her husband's name.

"Shall I write to him?" asked Phemie. "I have not done so till I heard what your wishes were."

"You must go to him," was the reply.

"Go—I—" repeated Phemie.

"Yes, he will never come back if you do not—never; and you owe it to me," went on the wretched woman, "to do what I ask. I told you this morning I had forgiven you long ago, but it was not the truth. I thought it was then; but

I must have been mistaken. If you go, and bring him back, and keep him from cursing me, I will forgive you—I will kiss the ground you walk on—I will love you as I have hated you. Go!”

“What shall I say to him?” asked Mrs. Stondon.

“What you like. You used to be able to wind him round your finger, try your power now. Go, go, for God’s sake, before he hears about it from any other person—go.”

Phemie rose and stood irresolute, then—“It is not fitting I should do this thing,” she said. “I will write to him if you like, or I will telegraph to my uncle to go to him direct, but you ask too much of me, Georgina, you do indeed. Basil is certain to return to see his child, and then you can tell him about—about—the accident. I cannot interfere between man and wife.”

“Cannot you?—give me the medicine, or wine, or water, or something; and let me speak out my mind. Have you never interfered between us?”

she went on, after swallowing the wine Phemie poured out for her. "Have I not felt you stepping between us every hour since my marriage. Did you not lay it on him as a curse—that he should never love any one as he loved you. Did not you, and has not the curse stuck? Has he ever loved another since—has he ever loved me?" and the unloved wife broke out into a fit of such passionate weeping as took Phemie totally by surprise.

"Dear Georgina," she began soothingly, but the other interrupted her with—"You need not try to smooth the matter over; if it had not been for you he might have loved me (I have been lying thinking over it all while you were out of the room), but as it was, he never loved me, and he will hate me now. He will say I did it, and perhaps he will say true. Whatever he wished Harry not to do I encouraged Harry to do, and now—and now—he will never speak to me again; he never will."

"He will not be so cruel, so unmanly," Phemie

said ; but Georgina answered, " Ah ! you do not know Basil Stondon, he can be both when he likes," and she buried her face in the pillows, and sobbed aloud.

" I will go to him," Phemie murmured ; her soul travelled back at that instant over the years, to the days when Basil had been cruel and unmanly towards her, and she accepted the errand which was now put upon her, as she would any other that had arisen out of the mad foolishness of that wretchedly happy time. " If I were to telegraph though to him to return, as Harry was ill, and then break it to him on his return, would it not do as well as my going ?"

" The people at the station would tell him."

" But if I met him at the station."

" He would hear about it on the line."

It was thus Georgina answered every argument, and at length, worn out by her importunity, Phemie yielded, and was about leaving the room to make the needful arrangements for her departure, when she was stopped once more.

"Whom were you thinking of taking with you," asked Georgina.

"Either Harris or Marshall," was the reply. "Harris, if you could spare him, would be the best."

"Take neither," was the reply; "Basil would get the truth from them."

"And do you absolutely wish me to travel to a strange place by myself."

"Yes—to serve me—to do me such a kindness," and she took Phemie's hand and kissed it humbly.

Within an hour Mrs. Stondon drove out of the gates of Marshlands, and started, all alone, to find Basil. Less than most women of the present day had she ever been thrown on her own resources, and the journey which no woman would have regarded as a pleasant one, seemed formidable in the extreme to her. All night she travelled on main lines or cross lines; now the compartment she occupied was shunted on one side at a junction, again she had to get out at some hitherto

unheard of station and change carriages, in order to reach her destination, which was a little out-of-the-way village in Yorkshire, where she arrived cold and stiff and weary, next morning at nine o'clock.

Quarry Moor boasted neither hotel nor station, nor town nor village. Passengers who desired to alight there, communicated their wishes to the guard at the previous stopping place ; and accordingly, Phemie found herself dropped at a gate, without a house in sight, or a living being to speak to, except the man who made signals that passengers were to be taken up, and who resided during business hours in a wooden box beside the line.

With some difficulty Phemie made this individual understand her position, and after a little hesitation, he gave her what probably might be regarded as sound advice.

In a wonderful accent he said, " she had better go straight on till she came to Mr. Urkirs' farm, and if you tell him what you want, happen he

will spare one of his labourers to take your message over to Goresby Manor."

Very patiently Phemie plodded on, with the moor stretching to right and left, the straight unfenced road before her, and the cold grey sky above. It did not seem to her that it was really she, Phemie Stondon, who was walking all by herself through Yorkshire; who had been travelling by night till she was frozen and stupefied; the whole performance appeared so like part of a dream, that she had to stop occasionally to realise she was hundreds of miles from her own home, and half way across Quarry Moor, on her way to tell Basil of his son's death.

On her arrival at the farm, Phemie found Mr. Urkirs out, but Mrs. Urkirs received the stranger very graciously, and at once promised to send one of the men over to Goresby.

"Mr. Goresby is our landlord," she explained, "and very likely the gentleman you want is one I saw riding past here with him yesterday. If you would like to go on, William shall put the

horse in the chaise and drive you over—but perhaps you would not ——”

Mrs. Urkirs stopped ; the thought in her mind was—perhaps the lady might not care to drive in a chaise with William for charioteer, but there was a look in Phemie’s face that told the worthy woman she would have gone in a wheelbarrow had any necessity existed for her doing so.

“I need not go on,” Phemie answered, however. “If you would allow me to remain here, I should much prefer doing so. Can you let me write a note to Mr. Stondon. He may not understand a verbal message.”

Considering the present price of paper, considering the millions of steel pens that are manufactured, and the rivers of ink which flow annually out of London, it is wonderful to consider that there are hundreds of thousands of houses in the United Kingdom where a letter never seems to be written, where ink might be made of attar of roses, and pens sold at a guinea a piece, judging

from the specimens of each which are presented for a visitor's benefit.

Even in the midst of her sorrow and anxiety, Phemie could not help some idea of this sort passing through her mind.

Mrs. Urkirs brought her first a quarter of a sheet of letter paper, then a bit of blotting paper about an inch and a-half square, then one of those penny stone ink bottles which were invented for the confusion of mankind, together with an old steel pen—which she rubbed “soft,” as she said, on the hearthstone—and a quill that had apparently been in use for a couple or so of generations.

Out of these materials Phemie constructed her epistle. It seemed easier to write in the lonely farm house than it had done at Marshlands—besides, she had no time to lose, no paper to waste ; as the words were set down so they had to stand.

“ Dear Basil,” she began, and she wrote

closely that she might not run short of space. "Dear Basil, I have come all this way at Georgina's request to say Harry is very ill, and to beg you to return home with me at once. I entreat of you not to let anything prevent your coming. Mrs. Urkirs kindly allows me to remain here till the messenger returns. I have directed him, if you are not at the Manor, to follow and give this to you.

"PHEMIE STONDON."

It was the first letter she had ever written to Basil, and while she folded it up she thought about that fact.

After William had mounted and departed she still went on thinking, and sate by the fire considering how strange it was she never should have written to him before—that no necessity had arisen through all the years of their acquaintance for her to send him even the merest line. How wonderful it was that on her should devolve the duty of making the man she loved wretched!

"I do not know how I shall ever tell him," she thought. "I do not."

"And the child is very ill, ma'am, you say," remarked Mrs. Urkirs at this juncture.

"He is dangerously ill," answered Phemie.

"And what a journey it was for you," went on the farmer's wife, who—the excitement of looking up writing materials and of despatching William over—was beginning to think the business odd.

"A fearful journey," was the reply, and Mrs. Stondon shivered.

"Could no person have come but you, ma'am," was the next question.

"His mother thought not," answered Phemie.

"You are the gentleman's sister, I suppose," suggested Mrs. Urkirs, after a pause, devoted to considering how she could possibly get at the bottom of the mystery.

"No," Phemie said; "I am only a very distant relative of Mr. Stondon," and she rose as she spoke and leaned her head against the stone

mantelshelf, and thought how she could best stop the woman's questions.

"Mrs. Stondon had a very special reason for wishing me to carry the message instead of entrusting it to a servant," she began at last. "I will tell you what that reason was before I go, but I cannot do so until after I have spoken to Mr. Stondon."

From that moment the two got on admirably. They talked about farming, about Yorkshire, about children, about London, about Norfolk, about Marshlands, about every conceivable topic, including the health of Mr. Urkirs and his "one fault," as his wife styled it, namely a disinclination to leave a "drain of spirits in a bottle."

Phemie had gone in a little for model farming at Roundwood, and was able to discourse gravely concerning stock and milch cows, soils and rotations.

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The lessons she had learned among the hills were applied practically to the lands in Sussex, and Mrs. Urkirs told her husband subsequently



that, to be a lady, Mrs. Stondon knew more about cropping than any woman she had ever met with.

Mrs. Stondon, on her part, was thinking all the time they conversed, of Basil's child and the Hill Farm. Could she really ever have lived in a farm-house? Was it true that Basil's boy was dead? In a vague kind of way she began to wonder whether, when he and she returned to Marshlands, they might not find it was all a mistake—that the doctor had done something—that Harry would yet be restored. Mercifully, death, when we are away from it, is hard to realise; till the first force of the blow is almost expended we never seem quite to lose hope; and thus it was that Phemie had to rouse herself occasionally in order to remember that the life was gone past recovery—that Basil could never hear Harry's voice again—that it was to his dead not to his sick she had come to summon him.

"I wonder how soon your man can return," she said at last.

"Well, ma'am, it depends on whether he would have only to go to Goresby or further. If Mr. Stondon was at the Manor he might—— But here is the gentleman himself," she added, as Basil came galloping along the road and up to the farm, where, flinging his bridle to one of the labourers, he threw himself from his horse and came hurriedly into the house.

"What is the matter with Harry?" were the first words he spoke.

"He has met with an accident," answered Phemie, while Mrs. Urkirs discreetly withdrew.

"How—when—where?" he persisted.

"Yesterday; somehow in the stable-yard."

He muttered an oath, and took a turn up and down the farm kitchen before he broke out—

"Weren't there enough of you about the house to have kept him out of harm's way. Sometimes I cannot think what women were sent into the world for at all."

She did not answer him. She knew what he did not know, and it kept her tongue quiet,

otherwise Phemie was not the one to have endured such a speech quietly.

Her silence had its effect, however, for he said next moment—

“I beg your pardon; of course I was not thinking of you, but of my wife.”

“Say what you like to me,” Phemie replied, “but spare your wife. She has suffered enough; she is very seriously ill.”

In answer to which appeal Basil said something under his breath, to the effect that she could sham illness when it suited her purpose, and impose on doctors as she had once imposed on him.

“She is not shamming now, at any rate,” Phemie answered, and Basil continued his walk.

“Is he badly hurt?” he began again, after a pause.

“I am afraid so.”

“Is he in danger?”

“He is.”

“ Was he insensible ? ”

“ Yes ; he had not spoken when I left.”

“ And why did you leave him ? Why could you not have sent one of the servants ? ”

“ Because I know everything that could be done for him would be done, and I wished you to return to Marshlands immediately. I wanted to telegraph, but Georgina would not hear of it ; so I started to find you as soon as possible.”

“ You have travelled all night then ? ”

“ Yes ; I arrived here at nine o'clock this morning.”

“ You must be very tired,” and he came up to where she stood and looked in her face.

“ If travelling for a year could do you or yours any good, Basil, I should not mind being tired ! ” she exclaimed, and her eyes filled with tears, to remember nothing she could do might be of any use now, to him or his.

He remained silent for an instant ; but then, putting out his hand, he touched hers, and said, piteously—

"What a fool I was, Phemie!—oh, what a fool!"

"Do not be one now then, Basil," she answered, and she drew her hand away from his and stepped back a pace or two.

"When does the train start?" she asked, and the question brought Basil to his senses.

"We have not much time to spare," he said; "there is a train at one o'clock. If we catch that we can then get a special once we reach the main line. But how are you to get over to the station? How did you come here?"

"I walked," she answered, "but Mrs. Urkirs will allow one of her men to drive me back, I know." And so it was settled that they should start immediately, and while Basil went out to speak about putting in the horse, Phemie talked to Mrs. Urkirs, and with that individual's assistance equipped herself for the journey.

When everything had been prepared for their departure; when Mrs. Stondon, duly wrapped up, was seated in Mr. Urkirs' light cart; when

Basil was mounted, and the boy whom he meant to take charge of his horse to Goresby had nestled down into the body of the vehicle, behind Phemie and the driver, the former stooped over the wheel and whispered to Mrs. Urkirs—who had come out to see that the rug was so disposed as to keep her visitor's dress from being splashed—stooped and whispered—

“The child is dead, and I want to break it to him gently as we go home.”

“I would rather she had the breaking of it to him than I,” remarked Mr. Goresby when Mrs. Urkirs, an hour subsequently, communicated to that gentleman the piece of information she had gained.

Mr. Goresby was a fresh, hearty, middle-aged squire, of the men-who-have-no-nonsense-about-them stamp, and he did feel most grievously sorry to hear of the misfortune that had fallen on his friend.

“Was this Mrs. Stondon a young woman?” he asked—standing beside the door of the farm-

house, with his arm through his horse's bridle, and his foot keeping turning—turning a loose stone as he spoke.

“Over thirty, I should think, sir,” was the reply. “Tall and stately-looking, and proud, seemingly, till you came to speak to her, but then she was just as pleasant and homely as yourself. She sat there in that corner by the fire, and cried when she talked about the child as she might if it had been one of her own. It was wonderful of her coming all this way by herself; there are few ladies, I am thinking, would have done it.”

“You are right there, Mrs. Urkirs,” answered the squire, and he mounted his hack and rode leisurely home to Goresby Manor, wishing to himself he had seen Phemie, and marvelling whether she was the former love he had once heard the mistress of Marshlands twitting her husband concerning.

“I suppose there is a woman at the bottom of every misfortune that happens to a man, if we

could only search deep enough," decided Mr. Goresby, who, being a bachelor, had always felt an intense curiosity to know the ins and outs of whatever love affair it was in Basil Stondon's past which had, as he mentally rounded the sentence, "put his life all wrong."

CHAPTER IX.

THE RETURN.

WHILE Mr. Goresby was trotting back to the Manor, over the Yorkshire moors, Phemie and her companion were travelling southward as fast as a train which stopped at every station and kept time at none, could take them.

They had the compartment to themselves, and each five minutes Phemie looked at her watch, and said to herself, "Now in a quarter of an hour I shall have told him," but when the quarter came and passed, Basil still thought his child was living.

He talked continuously about Harry and about his wife; he let the whole history of their wretched experience drop from his lips, sentence after sen-

tence. He said it was Marshlands she had wanted, and Marshlands she had got; he declared she thwarted him in his every wish—that it was enough for him to express a desire, and straight-way she opposed him.

“As for her children, she never cared for them—not in the least,” he went on; “she never cared for me either. Give her money and dress, and equipage and servants, and she would not fret if she never saw me more. She shall have her wish now; she may live in London or any place she likes, so as she leaves me and the children in peace at Marshlands. The children!” he broke off suddenly. “Oh! Phemie, do you think Harry will recover?”

“I am afraid there is no hope,” she answered, trying to steady her voice.

“She must not let me see her if anything happens to him,” he said, doggedly, and he went on to ask his companion whether she thought they would be in time, and then he broke into a rage about the slowness of the trains, about the folly

of not telegraphing for him instead of coming, about the certainty that whatever Georgina planned was sure to be wrong, about his conviction that if Phemie had stayed at Marshlands more might have been done for the boy.

"Who would sit up with him last night?" he went on; "who would attend to everything that the doctor directed? The idea of leaving the place with only servants under the circumstances, and Georgina even not being able to see to things! I think she is mad, I really do."

"I sent for my uncle," remarked Phemie.

"That is what she never would have thought of," was the husband's comment. Phemie drew back in her corner, feeling she could not tell him the worst, that he was impracticable, that he was selfish beyond anything she could have conceived of, that his affection for his child was but another form of affection for himself.

What good had her coming wrought, then? Had it done any one of the things Georgina had prayed of her to effect? They would speak indeed, but

there would be a quarrel—possibly a separation, for that was evidently the result Basil desired to bring about.

Never before, never had Phemie felt herself so powerless as with this man, who once professed to love her; and it was for him—oh! Heaven, it was for one like this—she had broken her husband's heart, and nearly brought dishonour on an honest man.

“How I loved him—God of mercy, *how* I loved him,” she murmured to herself, while her companion still kept rhyming out his complaints, and then, thinking of all the misery of the past—of the terrible trial in store for him—of the fearful contrast between his thoughts and hers, her self-command gave way, and covering her face with her hands, sobbed like a child.

In an instant Basil ceased his lamentations; the very tone of his voice changed as he asked her what was the matter—what he had said to vex her—why she was weeping. He drew her hands from before her eyes with a gentle force, and prayed

her to stop crying, or, at all events, to tell him what she was crying for.

"I was thinking about the years gone by," she answered.

"Those happy years," he said, and the voice was tender as the voice she remembered so well.

"Were they happy to you?" she returned. "They were not so to me. Can you bear to look back upon them?—I cannot," and then, urged by necessity, Phemie made a speech which brought the colour to her cheeks and dried the tears in her eyes. "You said you loved me in those days, Basil—was it true?"

"True as sorrow," he answered; but he felt there was something behind her question, and he kept his hand on her arm, and prevented her turning completely away from him, while she proceeded—

"I do not want to go back and tell of all the misery you caused me then, but I do want you to promise me something now, for the sake of that old dead love of the long-ago."

"Not dead, Phemie!—not dead!" he replied.

"Do not say that, or you stop me," she returned;
"or say it if you can, remembering everything,
and I will frame my request differently. For the
sake of the man who forgave you and me, both of
us, will you promise to grant me one favour?"

"I will."

"I want you not to speak harshly to your wife.
I want you not to reproach her. I want you never
by word or look to lay this—this accident at her
door, whether Harry lives or whether he dies."

He remained for a few moments looking down
at the carpet on the floor of the carriage, then he
answered—"You do not know everything, and
your request is harder to grant than perhaps you
can imagine, but still I will keep my promise—I
will not reproach her;" and he got up from his
seat and went to the opposite window to that at
Phemie's left hand, and looked out over the
country, and stamped his foot for very impatience
at the slow rate of travelling, and wondered if
they ever should arrive at the junction, and

how long it would take to get a special train ready.

She let him run on for a time in this manner, while she searched about for some form of words in which she might convey an idea of the worst to him. Over and over again he said—"nothing ever really hurt children; that they were like cats and had nine lives;" he wondered if Mr. Agglard would think of having a surgeon down from London; he mourned about his own absence from home, and then he began abusing the railway arrangements once more, and finally, pulling out his watch for the hundredth time, declared they ought to be at the junction in ten minutes.

"Once there, instead of waiting for the express we must get a special, and push on at a very different pace to this."

He flung himself into the seat by the window, as he spoke, and Phemie having at last made up her mind that she would tell him, left her place, and took the one opposite to that he occupied.

She had been thinking over the words she

should use for hours, and yet now no word she had intended to employ was uttered.

"Basil."

"Yes, Phemie."

"We need not hurry so much."

"What do you mean?"—he asked the question as though there was no necessity for him to do so.

He read the answer in her face.

"Oh! Basil—Basil!" she cried; and after that there was a great silence, while the train swept on.

She did not dare to look at him—but she felt blindly about for his hand, and took and held it in hers;—and he let it lie there passive.

When they came near to the junction, she resumed her old position, from which she stole a glance at Basil.

His face was shaded by his hand, and she could tell nothing of how it was with him.

With a great shriek and bustle, the train rushed into the station.

"He was dead, then, when you left," Basil said, without lifting his head, or turning his face, or moving his hand.

"Yes," she answered; and the train stopped, and the junction he had desired so earnestly to reach was gained.

Through the darkness, Phemie and Basil travelled on together, not by any special train but by the express, in which once again they were able to have a compartment to themselves. By the time they left the junction, the short day was drawing to its close; and before they had got twenty miles nearer home it was quite dark, and the stations through which they shot were lighted up and bright with gas.

They never spoke to one another. Greatly that journey reminded Phemie of a former one she had undertaken, when, through the night, she and her uncle hastened away from Marshlands to seek a new home. Then it had been Mr. Aggland who sate beside the window looking out into the summer night; now it was Basil who

never turned his head away from the contemplation of the blackness, which was no darker than his own thoughts.

Through the night the train dashed on—through the hours he and she never opened their lips to speak to one another.

She would have given anything to hear his voice—to hear even the sound of lamentation and the words of mourning, but Basil remained obstinately mute.

He was thinking of his boy—his first-born—the child whom he brought from India with him—thinking of him, and of his wife, and of the woman who had carried the evil tidings to him.

For the first time, also, he was thinking of his life—of his past—of the sin that past held.

Every idea seemed vague and shadowy—the only one certainty he appeared able to grasp being that Harry was dead, and that he was travelling home to see him.

Home—what a mockery the word sounded!

At Disley they found Mr. Aggland waiting for their arrival on the platform.

“I brought the carriage over on chance,” he said, “hoping you might return by this train. Mrs. Stondon is very ill,” he added, addressing Basil. But Basil paid no attention to the sentence.

“Does he know?” whispered Mr. Aggland to his niece, who nodded an affirmative.

After they reached Marshlands, Basil stood in the hall for a moment, like a man trying to collect his senses; but when Phemie was going to leave him with her uncle, he detained her, saying—

“I want to see——”

“Had you not better wait a little?” she asked.

He only answered her with an impatient gesture, and motioned that she should lead the way.

She ascended the staircase, he following; they passed by the door of Mrs. Stondon's room, and at the end of a long corridor crossed the threshold of the chamber in which the child lay.

Almost involuntarily as it seemed, Basil caught hold of Phemie's hand, after the fashion of a frightened girl; and so, together, side by side, they walked towards the bed.

He let her draw back the sheet, and then, trembling violently, looked upon his boy.

Till that moment it seemed as if he had not fully realised his loss. But whenever his eyes fell on the face—which was the face of his first-born and yet that of a stranger,—when he touched the little cold hands, and pressed his lips on the icy cheeks, Basil Stondon gave way, and his grief burst out wild and uncontrolled.

Phemie moved back and closed the door. Then, standing at a distance from him, she let the trouble flow on unchecked,—only, with



folded hands and bowed head, prayed for him silently.

There are few things in life harder to look upon than a man's violent sorrow;—and Phemie found it hard to witness Basil's. But yet she never tried to comfort him; she never crossed the room and laid her hand on his shoulder, and spoke to him words of sympathy. She knew the passion must find vent;—she felt that such an outburst was better for him than his former silence; and so she let the grief take its course without check or comment.

“Tell me about it,” he said at last; “tell me all you know.” And, thus entreated, Phemie told him how the child had given his nurse the slip, and got round to the stables during the men's dinner hour.

“Sewell saw him, but not in time,” she went on. “He saw Harry striking the young grey horse with a leather strap across the hind legs—so”—and Phemie imitated the boy's heedless stroke. “Sewell shouted to him to come away,

and ran across the yard to catch him, but before he could reach the stall the animal kicked out, and Harry never stirred again."

"I have punished him for that very trick a dozen times at least," said Basil; "and his mother has called me cruel for hindering him. What have they done with the horse?"

"I do not know," answered Phemie.

He went away along the corridor, and down the staircase, and so into the servants' hall; where, finding Sewell, he desired him to have the grey killed at once.

After that he returned to Harry's room; and neither persuasion nor remonstrance could induce him to move from it.

"Do you remember your promise, Basil?" Phemie asked at last, seeing that he made no movement to go and speak to his wife.

"Perfectly," he answered.

"And do you mean to keep it?" she persisted.

"I am keeping it," he said; "and shall keep

it all the better if I stay away from her. I cannot go and see her ; I cannot. If you will have it, I shall say something you would be sorry for. Do not ask me. Phemie—Phemie—for heaven's sake, leave me alone."

But she would not leave him alone. She prayed and entreated of him to go and see his wife. She persisted that unless he did so, he would be but quibbling with his word—breaking faith with her. She reminded him that it was Georgina's child as well as his who lay before him ; and at last, finding her words had none effect, she left the room, and tried to soothe his wife with such excuses for his absence as she could invent.

After a time, however, a message came from Basil, desiring to speak with her.

"I will go and tell her I shall never reproach her, if you wish me to do so," he said. "You have been very good to me, Phemie—very good, and kind, and patient ; and you have gone

through much for my sake, and I will pleasure you in this matter if you like."

"God bless you, Basil," answered Phemie—"God bless and comfort you;" and she stood aside while he passed into his wife's room, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER X.

BASIL'S COMFORTER.

THERE is a story told of a boy who, journeying through a thick wood, prayed diligently that Providence would deliver him from the dangers of the forest, until at last the trees were left behind, and the open country reached. Then said the lad, breathing a deep sigh of relief, "That will do ; I can take care of myself now."

What the boy said, we feel—not merely in our relations with the Almighty, but day by day in our dealings with our fellows.

While the danger is imminent, we are glad of any assistance, of any help, but the moment the wood is left behind, and safer ground reached, we mentally echo the lad's cry, and exclaiming, "We can take care of ourselves now," are glad

to be rid of our benefactors, and think we never can get the pilot fast enough off our decks—on to his own.

It was not long before Phemie discovered that Georgina, having got back her husband and escaped his anger, desired to be rid of the instrument who had brought about this result.

Prospective gratitude, as I have often before remarked, is one thing—retrospective another. Prospectively, Mrs. Basil Stondon had promised wonderful things to Phemie, if she did her bidding; retrospectively she rather underrated her services, and felt in the present jealous of her influence and power over Basil.

In those days if Phemie said “Go” to Basil he went. The more he thought of the woman whose life he had made so poor in happiness, the more he loved her—not with the unholy love of old—not with the passion which had scorched and blighted the green verdure, and the fair flowers of their once sweet Paradise—but soberly and purely, as a worshipper might love a saint.

He was not afraid of being with her now. He did not feel her presence torture—the sight of her a snare. No great human passion, unless indeed it may be revenge, can live within sight of death—and the way in which Phemie told him of his calamity had cured Basil, and changed him for life.

In his vigil beside his boy the past came and kept him company, and he repented him of the evil, and wished unavailingly he could go back through the years, and live them over again.

He had made her a lonely, desolate woman—a woman who in her widowhood could not even take to her soul the poor consolation of having done her duty faithfully by a husband she never loved. He had broken Captain Stondon's heart—he had wakened him from a pleasant dream. He had shown him the gold of the crown he wore was to him but as valueless tinsel—the gem he had prized so highly but glass in his possession. From the old man he had snatched away the last precious thing life held for him—

faith in his wife's love—belief in her perfect truth and purity. He was taken home and warmed beside his hearth, and when he had eaten his bread, and shared his affection, he turned and stung his benefactor; and then he left England, and the years had come and the years had gone, and he was rich and respected—yet—should he escape?

If he had forgotten, had God? If his sin had passed from his memory, like breath from the surface of a mirror, did it follow that the sin was forgiven? Though he had buried his fault—though he had hidden it away from sight—though the turf was green, and the roses blooming—there was still the body of his fault lying waiting for that resurrection which comes, even in this world, at an hour men least expect it, for the sins, and the follies, and the shortcomings, and the commission and the omission of their youth.

Trouble makes a man reflect: like adversity, it is a great teacher—and in the weary, weary

hours that elapsed between his son's death and the funeral, Basil Stondon learned more than he had ever done before, all his life long.

Hitherto the tale which experience traces on the memories of each of us had been to him as a narrative in a strange tongue; but now he got by degrees the clue to the mystery—the key to the cypher, and read the story day by day painfully and carefully. It had not been all a confused jumble of events, sorrows, temptations, joys, trials: Neither did it prove a disjointed puzzle that would not piece together and make a finished and perfect whole; but rather it was the fulfilment of a great truth which, once forced upon his attention, he had still elected to make light of—"The wages of sin is death."

Painfully he patched the map of his life together, and found those words traced across it.

Death—not such death as had come to his boy, not such peace and quiet, not such repose and freedom from trouble, but death like what had fallen upon Phemie—living death—death

to happiness, to hope, to the future. For wages are paid that they may be spent; and there can be no spending, no buying; no eating and drinking, of the bread of bitterness, of the waters of affliction, in the grave.

It was clear to him at last. He should have to bear as she had been forced to bear. She told him this truth herself—not hardly or pharisaically, not with the air of one who having been a martyr glories in recounting his sufferings, but pitifully and tearfully, across his son's body; and when the agony of this new light proved too much for him, when he bowed his head and covered his face and wept anew, she repeated to him the burden of that which she had said to herself before she went forth to seek him—

“Would God I could bear it for you; if it might be, I would bear all gladly.”

“I wish the punishment had fallen entirely upon me,” he answered, humbly.

He was much changed in those days—changed towards his wife more especially, and yet Georgina



did not feel satisfied. She knew who had wrought this alteration, even at her own request; and that knowledge woke to life the old jealousy, the old dislike, the old hatred of her successful rival.

"It is quite time we were back at Roundwood, uncle, I think," said Phemie to her uncle, as they walked together about the grounds on the day preceding that fixed for the funeral.

"We will go to-morrow if you like, dear," he answered. "You have done all you can do here. Mrs. Basil Stondon is, doubtless, greatly attached to you, and you have been of much use to her; but yet I believe—

'Of honey and of gall in love there is store,
The honey is much—but the gall is more.' "

"I am sure there is more gall than honey in her love for me," replied Phemie; "and therefore, although I do hope I have been of use here, I will pack up and go."

"I would, Phemie, I could see you packing up

and making preparations for happiness on your own account," he said, significantly.

"You speak in enigmas," was her reply.

"Do I? Let me try then to speak plainly to you, Phemie. I would see you married, sweet. I would have you try to give back love for love to a worthy man who loves you dearly."

"Who is he?" she inquired.

"One who is much at Roundwood, who misses no opportunity of visiting you, of talking with you—who——"

"You mean Major Morrice, I conclude," she interrupted. "He is certainly much at Roundwood, but for once your penetration has been at fault. It is Helen he wants. I am forestalling his petition, but you need take no notice of that when he comes to present it. Only cease connecting the idea of marriage and me, uncle, for I wed no more till death woos me."

"Phemie, you grieve me."

"Grieve you, when I tell you a good man and a true wants to marry your daughter, and

will ask you for her in due time. Uncle, it is you who grieve me. I did not think you so selfish and short-sighted."

She spoke laughingly, but he answered her seriously.

"Phemie, was there one of them I ever loved better than you? Had you been my own flesh and blood a hundred times over, could you have been nearer to me than has been the case?"

"I think not—I am positive not," she said; "but what then?"

"Then, dear, because you are so dear to me, I would see you happy."

"Happiness, uncle," she answered, "is to be compassed by the widow as by the wife—by the childless as by the mother. I am happy now—believe me, I speak the truth."

And she stood on tiptoe and kissed his cheek as she said this.

"I told you I would find work to do," she continued; "and I mean to try and carry out my idea: the girl's lovers shall be mine—to para-

phrase the old Scotch song—their husbands mine;—their children, my sons and daughters. There is a child here I love very much,” she went on, with a little hesitation; “a poor, neglected child, I wish I had for mine very own.”

“Do not wish for her, Phemie;—other people have more need of her than you,” Mr. Aggland replied; and before Phemie left Norfolk she knew he had advised her well.

Next morning the child who so lately had been regarded as heir to Marshlands, was borne from its gates and laid in the Stondons’ vault, close beside Phemie’s husband.

Dust to dust—ashes to ashes. The words were spoken, and the mourners returned.

“We will go by the last train, and stop in London for the night,” Mr. Aggland suggested; and as he suggested, so Phemie agreed.

When it was growing dark she went to Georgina’s room, and bade her good-bye.

“Good-bye,” said Mrs. Basil Stondon, who

felt, it might be, some qualms of reproach at seeing her unloved visitor depart according to her secret desire. "Good-bye, and thank you a hundred times over."

"Good-bye," answered Phemie; "and if ever you want my help again, come to me, Georgina, for I shall never come to you."

"Why?" asked the mistress of Marshlands; and Phemie replied—"You know why as well as I do. Because you do not wish to have me here; because it is well we should walk on our separate paths, apart."

"You always were peculiar," observed Mrs. Basil Stondon.

"Was I?" replied Phemie. "At all events, I always (unavailing perhaps) tried to be honest;" which retort silencing her enemy, she put her lips to Phemie's face and bade her farewell—not sorrowing.

Phemie then went to perform a harder task, that of taking leave of Basil.

He had shut himself in what was called the

library after his return from the funeral, and remained there the whole afternoon, refusing to be comforted.

Time after time Phemie gently knocked, but still obtaining no answer she went up to the nursery, and taking "Fairy" in her arms came down-stairs again and rapped on the panel loudly.

"I want to speak to you," she said. "I must speak before I go."

He came across the room and unlocked the door and gave her admittance, and then she walked to a chair near the table at which he had been sitting, and tried to induce him to take the child from her arms, but he motioned her away.

"Mamma—Mamma Phemie," sobbed the little girl in a passion of grief, hiding her face on Phemie's breast, "is he sorry it was not me? Nurse says he is."

Phemie looked at the father, who had heard his child's words—looked at him—and as Basil

stretched out his hands, rose and gave him his daughter.

“Fay! Fay!” he cried, sobbing like a woman; and he took the little creature to his heart, who nestled there.

CHAPTER XI.

CONFESSIONS.

THE months went by, and there were changes at Roundwood; such changes as Phemie had prophesied. If Major Morrice's wooing was long, his wedding was speedy; and early in the ensuing year he took his wife to her new abode.

Was Olivia Derno forgotten? you ask, and I answer No; but the man had his life to live though she was dead, and he felt it no slight on her memory to marry one who had known and loved her.

It was a very good match for Helen. "Very wonderful," said Mrs. Keller, with her nose in the air, "for a poor farmer's daughter."

"Never mind, Mrs. Keller," observed Phemie,

with that terrible knack of reading people's thoughts which her relative had noticed on the occasion of her first visit. "Major Morrice would have been almost too old a husband for any of your girls, and we will see what we can do for them yet. I think I have been a rather successful match-maker."

At this Mrs. Keller bridled, and wondered what Mrs. Stondon was talking about.

"About your daughters," answered Phemie quietly. "You do not want them to live single all their lives, I suppose; and if eligible husbands offer, you will not say them nay. Had I daughters, I should give them every opportunity of falling in love I could devise——"

"My dear Mrs. Stondon!"

"My dear Mrs. Keller!"

"Is it not time enough," said the latter lady, "to consider these matters when a gentleman proposes?"

"And treat marriage as an alliance between two high and mighty powers, instead of an affair

between man and woman," answered Phemie. "Just as you will. Let the girls come down here and stay, taking their chance of meeting a good husband, as they might of meeting a desirable acquaintance; or keep them away, it is immaterial to me; only, had I girls, I should give them an opportunity of making their choice, and deciding whom they loved best, before the irrevocable words were spoken—the matrimonial Rubicon crossed."

Mrs. Keller laughed, and said her hostess was eccentric; but for all that she let her girls be among the number of Helen's bridesmaids, and felt quite a maternal flutter when she heard a bachelor baronet was one of Major Morrice's dearest friends and his nearest neighbour.

To the surprise of every one interested in the matter, however, Duncan Aggland conceived a most violent affection for the second Miss Keller, and begged her mother to consider his request favourably.

He was not a baronet, and he was in business,

but still the lady consented to ignore his trade for the sake of his income.

"There are many engineers Members of Parliament," she remarked meditatively to Mrs. Stondon, at which observation Phemie laughed till she was weary.

"Pray do not put that idea into Duncan's mind," she said, "or he will never attend to his business;" and Mrs. Keller took the advice and held her peace.

"The birds are all on the wing, uncle," she said to Mr. Aggland one day, "and we shall soon be left solitary;" but it was in a more cheerful tone than formerly Phemie spoke. The days brought their duties with them, and the due discharge of daily duties ultimately ensures happiness to the man or woman who tries to act aright.

"And it will soon be summer again," Phemie proceeded; "where shall we go this year?"

They sat in the twilight of the spring evening talking about this place, and about that; and

then as the darkness drew on the night became cloudy, and the rain began to patter against the window-panes. The wind rose also, and they could hear the angry rush of the waves as they came rolling up louder and louder upon the shore.

"Heaven have mercy on those who are out at sea," said Mr. Aggland, looking forth into the gathering darkness, "for it is going to be a wild night;" and at the words Phemie shivered with the strange shivering of old.

She moved to the piano and played the first few bars of Handel's "Lord, what is man?" then she rose again and stirred the fire into a blaze, and pulled the chairs into comfortable positions, and turned the lamp up to a desirable height, and then stood before the hearth meditatively.

"Sing for me, Phemie dear, if you are not tired," said her uncle, who knew that when these restless moods came on, music was the best and, indeed, the only sedative. "Sing for me a song

or a hymn, a ballad or a psalm—what you will, only sing.”

Obediently she walked across the room and began making melody. Now she sang, and again she played; now it was “*Ave Verum*,” and then she stopped abruptly and drew her hands from the instrument, only to commence that sonata of Beethoven’s which contains within its leaves the Funeral march upon the death of a Hero.

“What a night it is!” she broke off at last to say, “do you hear the rain?”

“And how the wind is howling!” answered Mr. Aggland; “it puts me in mind of the way it used to come up the valley at Tordale, running like a racehorse between the hills, and then flinging itself against our door. Do you remember how it beat for admittance—how it rattled against the windows—how it screamed and shrieked, as if it were a living thing, to be let in—only to be let in?”

“Yes,” Phemie said, pursuing the same idea;

“and how it used to go away, sobbing and moaning like one in great pain, across the moor to Strammer Tarn. I often thought in those days I should have loved to be beside the Tarn when the night wind came home there; I always felt as though it lived among those great rocks and boulders. Do you not wonder whether it is as rough a night up in the Cumberland Hills as it is down here by the coast? Do you wonder who is living in the old place now, and whether they are gathered close round the fire as we had a way of gathering when the wind was howling at the door?”

“I often think about the old place, Phemie,” he said. “When I am sitting quietly here by your fireside, dear, in such peace and comfort as I once thought never to know, my fancy turns many and many a time back to Tordale; it was a sweet spot—ay, you might travel far to find one lovelier—beautiful as Roundwood is, I never can fancy it so perfect as Tordale. I wish we had a drawing of the valley. I think I shall ask

Duncan, next time he is in the north, to bring me a sketch of it."

She turned a little from the piano, and, leaning her elbow on the keys, bade him go on and talk to her about their Cumberland home—

"Which I supposed we shall love best of all," she finished, "to the end."

"Yes," Mr. Aggland replied, "probably, for—

‘This fond attachment to the well-known place,
Whence first we started into life’s long race,
Maintains its hold with such unfailing sway,
We feel it e’en in age, and at our latest day.’

—But, mercy on us! how the rain is coming down! I do not think I ever heard heavier rain even in Cumberland;" and he rose as he spoke, and, putting the curtains aside, looked out into the night.

Just then there came a ring at the front door—a peal, hurried, loud, and yet conveying the idea of the bell having been pulled by an unsteady hand.

"Who on earth can it be at this hour, and in such a storm?"

Phemie had started up as the peal echoed through the house, and uncle and niece stood looking apprehensively in each other's faces for a moment, wondering what could be wrong.

"It must be a message from one of the boys," said Mr. Aggland, hurrying next instant to the drawing-room door; but before he could reach it a servant announced Mr. Basil Stondon, and that gentleman entered.

"What a night for you to choose," exclaimed Mr. Aggland.

"What have you got there?" asked Phemie, pointing to something which lay hidden under Basil's coat.

"A trifle for you to take care of for me," he answered, "if you will;" and he put the rough covering gently aside, and showed her Fay lying fast asleep in his arms.

"Basil"—Phemie could not find another word to say to him.

"What is the meaning of it?" Mr. Aggland

asked. "Is your wife ill—are you mad—or is she dead?"

"She is dead to me," Basil answered; "take my child, Phemie, and let me go; I only came to ask you to be kind to her."

The water was absolutely dripping off him as he spoke—he stood in a little pool in the centre of the room—outside, the rain was pouring down in torrents, and mingling with the noise of the rain was the howling of the wind and the rushing sound upon the shore, of the not far distant sea.

"Go up to my uncle's room and change your clothes directly," was Phemie's unromantic comment on this explanation; "give me the child. Basil, you are mad."

For some time he stood it out with her that he would neither change his dripping garments nor remain in Roundwood even for the night.

"Where are you going?" asked Phemie.

"I have no plan; I am not sure; I do not know."

"Well, then, I do," she interrupted. "You

thrust a letter into her hand, which she held unopened while she said : —

“Now be reasonable, and listen to me. Standing in your wet clothes, or wandering about the country, will not mend matters in the least. Unless you do what I ask you, I will not take care of Fay; I will not even put her to bed, nor take charge of her for a single night.”

“But why should I remain?” he began; which sentence Phemie cut short by directing a meaning glance towards her uncle, who at once laid his hand on Mr. Stondon’s arm and led him from the room.

Then Phemie rang for her maid, and gave Fay into her charge, after which she unfolded the missive Basil had left with her, and read one of the most glowing and tender love-letters it had ever fallen to her lot to peruse.

Her first idea was that her senses must be playing her some trick; her next was a purely feminine wonder as to what manner of man could

have become so desperately enamoured of Georgina Stondon.

"After that," said Mistress Phemie to herself, "I will never disbelieve in witchcraft again;" and she remained standing beside the fire, not so much shocked as astonished—lost, in fact, in such a labyrinth of amazement and conjecture as completely bewildered her senses.

"I would not have believed it, Basil," she said, "if I had not seen it; and I do not believe it yet."

Mr. Aggland brought their unexpected guest downstairs again to the drawing-room, and then left him and his niece to talk the matter over together.

"I quite agree with you, Phemie, that he is mad," he whispered ere he went; "but he will be better in the morning if you can only induce him to eat something and go quietly to bed. Let him talk—it will do him good."

Having received which piece of advice, Phemie went back to the man she had once loved so

passionately, and spoke to him the words I have written.

"I would not have believed it had I not seen it, and I do not believe it yet."

He looked up at her with a sad, hopeless expression in his face.

"She did not deny it, and I gave her the chance of doing so."

What could any one say in reply to this? Even Phemie stood mute; while he went on angrily:—

"What did I ever do, that she should have played me false? Have I not been a good husband to her? Has she not had wealth and standing? Was she not poor, and did I not make her rich? If we did quarrel at times, it was all her own fault. Since—since Harry died, I swear to you, Phemie, I never have spoken a cross word to her—never. I have tried to live at peace with her. If I had been like other husbands——"

"Oh, Basil, stop!—oh, Basil, stop!" Phemie

cried out shrilly, like one in some bodily pain; for, as he spoke, there came up before her the memory of another husband very unlike Basil indeed—a husband who had taken a young girl from poverty and drudgery to raise her to wealth and station—a husband who had never looked coldly on her—a husband who stood between his wife and the world—who had been so careful of her reputation that he would not acknowledge even to her that her purity was in peril—who removed the stumbling-block from her path, and the snare from her feet—and then grew suddenly old and infirm, and died bearing his burden of sorrow to the grave with him patiently.

Till she heard this man vaunting himself—this poor, weak, selfish sinner thanking God that he was not as other sinners—it had never fully come home to her what a great heart it was he and she had mutually broken—what a grand nature they had tricked and deceived.

But the dagger had found the vulnerable point

at last, and every nerve in Phemie's body thrilled with pain as she implored of him to stop.

For a moment he stared at her in surprise, but then he knew how he had hurt her—how and where; and a dead silence ensued—a silence like that which fell between them when she took her place opposite to his in the railway carriage, and told him there was no need to hurry.

During that pause each fought out a mental battle, and then, when they had waged their conflict, beaten down separately the phantoms that came up to reproach them, Phemie turned to Basil and said calmly, as though that cry of irrepressible agony had never escaped her lips :

“ There is no name. Have you any idea who it is ? ”

“ Not the least,” he answered ; “ but I will know ; I will find it out ; I will free myself and my child from her—I will.”

“ No, you shall not,” Phemie interrupted. “ Let Georgina be what she may, you shall not do this thing until, at all events, you have had time to

think over the matter calmly and justly. You shall hold your peace about her ; you shall make no scandal ; you have been mad enough in coming here in this fashion to-night, and bringing Fairy with you, and talking before the child as you have done ; but that is all the more reason why you should be quiet and prudent now."

She calmed him down by degrees, and after a time, although she could not get him to go to bed, she did induce him to eat something, and to sit down before the fire, "like a rational being," as she observed.

When he thought Mr. Stondon must have had ample time to say his say, Mr. Aggland re-entered the room, and urged upon him the desirability of his at once swallowing a certain decoction of herbs, which would, so that gentleman assured him, prevent his having to retire into what Charles Lamb calls "that regal solitude, sickness."

"I should like to be sick," retorted the other, pettishly.

"Should you ?" said Mr. Aggland ; " 'twould

be a pity, then, to balk so reasonable a fancy ;” and he leaned back in his chair and gave over the patient, who remained looking steadfastly at the fire, while from a little distance Phemie contemplated him.

He was a young man no longer ; his youth, like her own, had flitted by, leaving no outward traces of its former presence. He was not the Basil Stondon who had come to her beside Strammer Tarn, brushing his way through the heather to the spot she occupied. He was middle-aged, and worn and haggard, not in the least resembling the dream-hero who had crossed the hills too late—too late.

When she thought of that hero, Phemie could see the man no more for the tears that blinded her.

Dreams, friends—dreams ! I wonder if we ever shed such bitter tears when the realities of our lives are destroyed and the once sure earth cut from beneath our feet, as we do when, in a mist-wreath, the air-castle vanishes—when the

once limitless lands of our fairy kingdom disappear in the depths of the ocean, and are lost to our sight for ever.

Prosperous as her life had proved, Phemie at any rate found it hard to look back upon the dreams and fantasies of her girlish days with equanimity.

She had been thinking much of Tordale and the Hill Farm—of the old old life—of the beauty of that secluded valley—of the Church—of the waterfall, of the mountains and the fells—before Basil broke in upon her reminiscences; and now she could not help bringing his figure as she remembered it into the mental picture likewise—she could not avoid recalling *that* day—when, among the glorious sights and sounds of summer, he crossed the hills in order to tell her all his love.

Strammer Tarn at that moment was more real to her than her luxuriously furnished room at Roundwood. Basil—the dream-hero Basil, the careless, handsome, thoughtless, wicked, and yet

not intentionally wicked sinner—was more real to her than Georgina's husband. She, herself, was for the moment no widow—no worn, changed woman—but a wife in the full flush of her beauty, resisting the temptation to which that very beauty had exposed her, trying to stand firm against his love and her own.

It was all like a story to her that night, like a real tale of another person's life, and I think the Phemie who was no longer young, and who had passed through much suffering, and who knew that no temptation could come to her to shake her more, felt sorry for that far-away figure which, crouching among the heather and the grass and the wild thyme, wept passionately.

Does the tale grow wearisome, reader?—are these particulars too minute?

If they be, bear with me still a little, I pray, for the story is drawing to its end; the last page will soon be reached, the final touch given to the figures we have been studying, the volume completed, the book closed and laid aside; and before

that end is reached, I would have you take in the retrospect of Phemie Keller's life as she took it in, and regard her, as for one moment she regarded the girl, and the woman, she beheld standing young and fanciful and foolish—young and beautiful and tempted—pityingly.

But not one half so much pity did she feel for that former self, as she did for the man who sat by her hearth, whose punishment had fallen upon him so late.

Thinking of the Basil she had known—thinking of all he might have made of his life—of his opportunities—of his position—of his friends—of his winning manners—of his frank, free, generous disposition—Phemie thought her heart must break for very pity, for very remorse, to remember she had ever a hand in bringing about so poor an ending to a once promising story.

How might a woman like herself, had she only been true, and kept him from loving her, or changed his unholy love into respect and trust and admiration, not have moulded such a nature.

He had loved Miss Derno, and yet Miss Derno came in time to be the best friend, the most faithful adviser his manhood ever knew.

"Oh! if I had only loved him less, or loved my husband more," thought the poor soul, as a finish to her own bitter reflections; "*this* need never have come upon him; he might have stayed in England and married a different wife, and been happy instead of wretched; useful in his generation, instead of a mere cumberer of the ground."

When she had arrived at this point in her argument, Basil came back from his mental journey, wherever it had taken him, and speaking like a man wakened suddenly from sleep, said that he thought he should like to bid her good-night, that he was beginning to feel very chilly.

"You had better take my prescription," observed Mr. Aggland; and Basil did take the dose, which proved impotent, however, to work the cure its discoverer promised it should effect, for next morning he was so ill he could not rise,

and before the following night fever set in, and for a time all his troubles were forgotten.

He raved frantically indeed, but not about his sorrows; as is often the case, his mutterings contained no reference to the cause of his illness; he wandered in imagination, not through the night carrying his child with him, not across the seas to seek his fortune, not over the hills to find Phemie, blue-eyed and auburn-haired; but backwards and forwards—to and fro in a land full of strange fancies—of mad vagaries—of unreal horrors—of fearful delusions—of horrible spectres.

Very rapidly he got worse, so rapidly, indeed, that before Mrs. Montague Stondon could be written to and arrive from Paris, which capital she was then honouring with her presence, the doctors had begun to look very grave, and, to adapt an old saying to present use, although they hoped the best, evidently believed the worst.

When it came to that, Phemie declared that, let the consequences be what they might, she

should send for his wife ; and Georgina was sent for accordingly.

Almost before Phemie thought it possible she could arrive, Mrs. Basil Stondon reached Roundwood, reached it with the cold hardness, with the insolent sarcasm beaten and pinched out of her face.

“ Why did you not write to me before ? ” she asked, almost fiercely.

“ Because I was not certain whether I ought to write at all,” Phemie replied.

“ Then he came straight to you : I might have known he would ; and Fay is here also, I suppose ; and—he showed you the letter.”

“ He did, but we will not talk about that now.”

“ But we will talk of it, if you please. You believed in that letter, I suppose—you mourned over my shortcomings—you sympathised with a man who was tied to so wicked a wife—you dreamed perhaps of a divorce, and thought it within the bounds of probability that Basil Stondon and Euphemia Stondon might one day

stand before the altar. Did you? I hope you did, for the letter was a sham? Ay, you may look at me," she went on with a hysterical laugh. "I wrote it every word myself, and I left it in his way on purpose to see if I could rouse any feeling in him."

"What an idiot you must be, Georgina," exclaimed Phemie, indignantly; "what a senseless, wicked, foolish, childish trick it was. If he dies, his death will be at your door. How could you do it?—how came such a plan ever to enter your mind?"

"One cannot live near ice and not desire to thaw it," was the reply; "may I see him?" she added, more humbly; "would it do him any harm if I spoke to him for a moment?"

"He will not know who you are," the elder woman answered; and she led the way to where Basil lay, his wife following.

Then for the first time Phemie understood that Georgina loved her husband with all her heart, and soul, and strength; that all through

their married life the attachment had been on her side, that she would have done anything to secure his affection, had she known how; that it would, as she declared, kill her if his illness proved fatal.

"I did more to win his heart than ever you could have done," she said, when at last Phemie had dragged her from the sick-chamber. "I would have gone through fire and water for him, but he never loved me—never!"

"He must have loved you, or he would not have married you," Phemie answered.

"I made him marry me," was the reply. "He married me because I loved him; do you understand that, Mrs. Stondon—you, who were so cold, and so prudent, and so selfish? If I had been in your place, if I had been married fifty times, I would have left my husband for his sake. If he had loved me as he loved you, I would have quitted Marshlands had he held up his finger for me to come. I nursed him,"—she continued, speaking hurriedly and excitedly,—“I nursed

him all through that illness he had in India. I brought him back from death. He could not have lived but for my care. It is no light thing, let me tell you, tending a man through a long sickness out in that climate, and when he got better I was like a ghost; but he knew I loved him,—knew no woman could have done what I did had she not loved him, and he married me, and I thought I had won the battle at last.”

“And afterwards,” Phemie suggested, as the speaker paused.

“Afterwards!” repeated Mrs. Basil Stondon. “You want me to go on and tell you how you beat me at every move—how it was your men on the board prevented my winning the game. So be it. The game has not been all profit to you either, so I must rest satisfied.”

“For pity’s sake,” entreated Phemie, “forget that he ever was fond of me; let the dead past lie: it was never so fair or pleasant that you need be continually taking off the coffin-lid to look at it.”

"Don't talk to me about coffins," exclaimed Georgina, with a shudder, "and he so ill; and as for your request, I would let the past lie if I could. I would bury it half a mile deep, and never desire to hear of it again, if you and he would only let me; but is it in a woman's nature—cold as you are, I put it to you, would it be even in yours—to see a stranger preferred before you—to feel that she is seated in the innermost chamber while you are shivering outside on the doorstep?"

"It would not," Phemie answered; "but then I am not in the innermost chamber, so there is no use in making yourself miserable about the matter."

"If you are not, who is?" demanded Mrs. Basil Stondon; and Phemie remained silent for very want of the ability to answer the question. "If you had not been, would he have come to you with that letter?—would he have rushed straight as he did from me to you? Go back over your own life. When Captain Stondon

found out that you and Basil were so fond of one another, what did he do? Did he fly from you as he might from a pestilence? Did he publish the story to Miss Derno, or any other miss or madam in the kingdom? Did he?"

"No," replied Phemie; "but then my husband was a very different man to yours."

"True," said Mrs. Basil Stondon, "he was a very different man, and a very much better. You had a good husband, if you had only known how to value him; but still, good or not, different or not different, had Basil loved me he never would have come to you. It was my last attempt; now I throw up the cards."

And when Georgina concluded, she made a movement as of flinging something from her, and turned sullenly aside.

Finding, however, that Phemie did not speak, she faced round again and asked,—

"Have you got nothing to remark on all that? When Basil gave you his version you were

surely not so dumb ? ” But still Phemie made no reply.

She was wondering whether she should ever be able to reconcile this pair—whether any interference of hers might produce some good result—whether, if he lived, she could bring about some better understanding—whether, if he died, he would first recover sufficiently to speak kindly to his wife ere he departed.

“Are you going to open your lips again to-day ?” persisted Mrs. Basil Stondon ; and at last Phemie answered, while she rose and laid her hand gently on Georgina :—

“Yes. I am going to ask you, why you will persist in regarding me as your enemy ? When I followed Basil into Yorkshire—when I brought him home with me—when I broke the bad news to him in such a way that he never had an angry feeling towards you in consequence, was I your enemy ? Was I not, at all events, only doing your bidding—only trying to accomplish what you wanted, to the best of my ability ? ”

"Yes ; but it seemed so hard for such interference to be necessary," said Georgina, softening a little.

"Was that my fault? He married you ; why he married you is quite beside the question ; he did marry you, and for years you had him all to yourself. I should not care if a man had loved fifty women before he made me his wife. If I could not turn them all out, and keep the citadel against them, I should say I did not deserve to have it."

"And does the same rule hold good with regard to husbands, Mrs. Stondon?" asked the other, maliciously.

"We were talking of wives, not of husbands," answered Phemie; and continued: "Feeling as you did towards me, why did you ever ask me to Marshlands?—why did you press me to stay there?"

"Because I was weary of my life—because you were better than nobody—because it looked well—because it tormented Basil—stop ; let me

go back to the beginning, where you interrupted my story. I do not mind showing you my hand, now the game is over. We were married, as I told you; the mutiny broke out, and we were bound still closer by the feeling of a common danger; besides, he was grateful to me. Oh! yes, he was grateful, for he set great store by his life, and I had saved it! My father was killed, as you heard, and Basil was sorry for my loss. Altogether, though I knew he did not love me even then, still we got on very well for a time, and the only quarrel we had originated in his obstinate refusal to write to Captain Stondon and tell him of his marriage."

"‘You are afraid of *him* letting *her* know, I suppose,’ I was provoked at last into saying. That was my first downright bad move, and you were the occasion of it.

"‘It was your doing, then, that I had to leave Marshlands,’ he answered on the instant, almost indeed before I had time to wish my own words unspoken, ‘how did you manage it?’

"I told him all—I did really—all that you have assured me came to your knowledge after you were left a widow. I could not help writing that note. I would have done anything to part you—anything to get him out to India with us—I was so fond of him; but he put it all down to love of Marshlands; and so, when at last news came to us of your husband's death, he turned to me and said, 'You have got that which you schemed for so well and so long; I wish you joy of it.'

"There was something else, though, in his mind at the moment—something I read out of his face that I knew he would not have put into words for anything; but I did for him. I said, 'You are thinking she is free, and I am bound. I am bound, and she is free!'"

"Have mercy, Georgina!"—It was Phemie who entreated this boon. She was turning faint and sick at such a thought being put before him in its naked deformity; but Georgina's answer made her stand erect and defiant once more.

"Do you think, if I had not mercy on him, I am

going to take pity on you?" she asked. "I told him his thought in so many words. I taunted him with it, and then we had a fearful quarrel—the first of our new series, which has never ceased from that day to this. It was then he informed me of the pleasant ban you had laid upon him—almost exultingly he spoke of how your words had come true—of how, although you might never be to him what I was, yet that still you would always be something nearer and dearer by far. He did not spare me a pang, you may depend upon it. Then I learned what was in my husband; I have never unlearned that knowledge since."

"I am very sorry,"—Phemie uttered this sentence humbly—"forgive me, Georgina, my share in your misery. What you tell me is very terrible—it must have been dreadful for you to bear."

"I did not bear it," was the quick reply; "I did not even regard it as payment for breaking the heart of a better man, than ever you were a woman. I battled against it; I was hard, and he was harder; I would not accept my position,

and he scoffed at me when I tried to alter it. We came back to England, and he wanted to travel down to Marshlands alone; but I had a suspicion we should find you there, and I was resolved not to lose the sight of that interview at any rate. I had the advantage, so far as he was concerned, for he really felt afraid to meet you, and it was a triumph for the time being. Next to getting the thing one wants for one's self, the greatest pleasure in life is seeing another disappointed in getting it also. Altogether," proceeded Mrs. Basil Stondon, "I fancy I got the best in that matter. Had I not been present, there would have been opportunity for some tender passages between Basil and yourself. What is wrong, now?" she added, as Phemie suddenly moved aside, and drew her hand away, and shook her dress, seeming to think there must be contagion in the very touch of her companion's garments.



CHAPTER XII.

PHÉMIE EXPRESSES HER OPINIONS.

"WHAT is wrong?" repeated Mrs. Stondon, her indignation breaking bounds at last, "only this, Georgina, that if you marvel why you have never been able to win Basil's love, I do not. How one woman could speak to another as you have spoken to me this day I cannot comprehend. What you must be made of to say the things, to utter the taunts, to inflict the wounds you have done, passes my understanding. I used to blame your husband for his neglect and unkindness. I do not blame him now. My sole wonder is that he has stayed with you at all. I should not have done it had I been in his place."

"You know nothing about me," returned Geor-

gina, who was more astonished and subdued by the foregoing speech than she would have cared to acknowledge—"and therefore you cannot understand my feelings. You never loved him as I did."

"No, I never did," Phemie answered, "and I thank Heaven for it. All the love you are capable of feeling for any one is very poor and mean and selfish; and, as I said before, if you think a nature such as yours is one calculated to win love from man, woman, or child, you are greatly mistaken. The man is not in existence, at least I hope he is not, who would not come in time to hate a woman that could deliberately inflict such suffering on another woman as you have forced me to endure to-day, and many a day before—many and many a day."

Was it true—were these words, which, in the very extremity of her passion and anguish, escaped from Mrs. Stondon's lips, as true as Heaven? Georgina had heard similar words before spoken by her husband, and the very remembrance of the

fact lent additional bitterness to her tone as she exclaimed—

“And have I endured nothing at your hands? Is it nothing to have had you standing between me and him every hour since we were married—to know he has never regarded me save as an encumbrance, a burden; to feel he loved your little finger better than my whole body?”

“I could not help that,” Phemie returned. “If, knowing what you knew, you chose to marry him, I am not to be held responsible for the unhappiness of either of you. Had it been in my power to make him give affection to you, he should have done it. I did not want to keep the heart of any woman’s husband. I would not have taken from you a grain of his love, could any act of mine have prevented his wasting it upon me. I have never asked for it. I have never sought it.”

“Not even when you stayed at Marshlands to welcome him home, I suppose,” remarked Georgina; and there was a moment’s pause ere Mrs. Stondon replied—

"It was foolish for me to stay; foolish and weak; but yet, when the grave gives up its victim, when the sea returns its dead, can we stop to argue about wisdom and propriety? I did wrong in remaining, but I did not remain with any purpose of trying to revive the past between us, I only waited to bid him welcome home before I left Marshlands for ever."

"Of course," remarked Georgina drily—"you told us that at the time, and made your exit with singular felicity, I admit; but still it strikes me that had it not been for my appearance—Shall I go on, or will you supply the rest of the sentence for yourself?"

"You can go on, or you can remain silent, whichever seems most agreeable," answered Phemie. Remaining at Marshlands was the one part of her conduct since her husband's death which she had always feared to analyse too exactly, which she could neither explain to another nor defend to herself; it was the weak point in her armour, and she could not hinder this woman

stabbing her through it, again and again. She remembered all she had felt when she beheld Georgina's bright mocking eyes looking at her distress. She was never likely to forget the dull horrid shock of that apparition, nor the first sight of *their* child, nor the despairing misery of her heart as she travelled away through the night, reciting to her own soul every line of the weary story which I have endeavoured throughout the course of the preceding pages to tell.

But for that one error of stopping to greet the man whom she ought to have avoided, his wife could have had no power over her now. Even as it was, however, Phemie fought out her fight bravely, and continued—

“ You can put any construction on my conduct that pleases you ; it is perfectly immaterial to me whether you believe I stayed for the purpose of winning Basil, as you would have done, or remained for the simple reason I have before stated, as was really and truly the case. You can think I am like you or like myself, whichever you choose. I

shall enter into no further explanation or discussion, but only repeat what I said at first, that I never sought Basil's love, and you know in your heart that I speak the truth."

"It is a truth difficult to grasp," was Georgina's reply.

"Most truths are difficult to grasp," agreed Mrs. Stondon; "it is very difficult for me now to believe that, feeling as you say you have always done towards me, it was of your own free will you asked us to join our party to yours at Ambleside; of your own free will you renewed the acquaintanceship which had been allowed so completely to drop; of your own free will, and at your own special and earnest invitation, repeated over and over again, not merely verbally but in writing, I went to visit you at Marshlands; of your own free will you almost forced me to remain with you when I really desired to return home; of your own free will you sent me a long journey into Yorkshire to bring back the husband you have since then alienated again from you by your sense-

less, childish folly. Truths such as these are hard to grasp, but still they are truths for all that."

And Phemie, as she concluded this pleasant sentence, reared up her head with a certain haughty defiance, and looked down on Georgina, who, remembering at the moment all this disdainful woman might still be able to do for her, stretched out her hand and tried to draw Mrs. Stondon back into her former position.

Mrs. Stondon's temper was up, however; and she therefore disengaged her dress, and moved a little farther away from her visitor—who said, deprecatingly,

"I always liked you for yourself;—that may explain much which has seemed to you inexplicable. When you did not come between me and Basil, I was as fond of you as I ever was of any one, except him; but it is not easy—no wife ever does find it easy—to endure a stranger's interference."

"Did I want to interfere?" Phemie retorted.
 "Whose doing was it that I ever had the mis-

fortune to meddle in your affairs at all? Did I kill your child? Did I wish to go running about the country after your husband? Do you think it was any pleasure to me travelling by night, and walking over those horrid moors, and begging at strange houses for help, horses and messengers, from the hands of strangers, in order that I might find, and bring him to you speedily? Would any woman on earth have started on such an errand of her own inclination? Do you imagine I enjoyed that return journey with him? Can you not conceive that it was torture—absolute torture—telling him about his son's death?—that the task you set me was a very difficult one, and proved by no means easy of accomplishment?"

"If you could only imagine what he has been like since!" observed Georgina.

"Why, he told me he had never spoken a cross word to you from that day to this;—that he had given you no ground, not the slightest, for——"

"I know what you mean—the letter. He

spoke truly—and yet—and yet—is there not a worse unkindness than harshness? I would rather have quarrelled with him fifty times a day, than live with him as we have lived together lately. He never has said a cross word. He told me he had promised you he would not. He only grew perfectly indifferent. I never, in fact, saw him from morning until night,—and then all at once I thought I would see if nothing could move him—if I could not work him up into a fury, if I could not wring one word of affection from him. I grew sick of seeing him and Fairy,—he so fond of her—she so fond of him. If he had only given *me* a little love, I should not have minded—I should not, indeed, so much.”

She turned her eyes, as she finished this sentence—not on Phemie, but out upon the lawn; and Mrs. Stondon could not avoid seeing the pained worn look there was in her once bright countenance—the pinched expression I have mentioned before, about her cheeks and mouth.

"All my life long," she began again, and the tears came trickling slowly down her face, "I never loved anything but him—never. Whom had I to love?—neither brother nor sister nor mother: perhaps I should not have cared for them, had I possessed them all; but I was never tried. There was no one in the world to care for me excepting my father, and he lived in India; and if he had been in England, you know what he was. Often and often I wonder what you would have been like, had you been brought up like me;—what I should have been like, had I been born and lived my life among those Agglands. I think I might have been different. I am confident you would."

"It is not impossible," said Phemie, coldly.

"I was always at school—always either there or with my father's sisters, who were, I do think, the most horrid old women on earth. When I went down into Norfolk, and stayed with the Hurlfords, it was like getting into Paradise—they were so different to the people I had been

used to; and yet still you know they are nothing very particular in the way of amiability either. I had met Basil before. I was so happy to be near him: but I hated Miss Derno; and afterwards I hated you."

"Thank you," said Phemie; "truth is best, even if it be disagreeable."

"I loved you; indeed, indeed I did, till I found out Basil cared for you. Believe it or not, just as you choose—I did love you, if it was only for the opportunities you gave me of meeting him; but when I saw how it was between you, I thought I should go mad. I could have torn your hair out by the roots, I was so jealous of it. I felt glad when everybody said you would be disfigured for life after that accident. It was so hard—oh! it was so hard—when you had such a husband, and after Basil had paid me attentions. Do justice to me in that matter, Mrs. Stondon. Might not any girl have thought——"

"He was in love with her—certainly," answered

Phemie. "I never saw Basil speak to a girl excepting tenderly; but I do not think he was more tender to you than to others. If he had, I believe I should have noticed it;" and the speaker adjusted her white linen cuff with an appearance of careless indifference, while Georgina exclaimed—

"Do not be cruel, too—do not—do not! What is the use of being superior, as people call you, to our weaknesses and foibles—what is the use of standing where you do, if you cannot afford to forgive and be generous with a woman like me?"

"What is it you require, Georgina?" asked Mrs. Stondon. "What is it you want? I told you when we parted at Marshlands I would help you if I could, and I will help you; but I cannot be your friend. I can forgive, but it is no such easy matter to forget."

And the cuff was buttoned over again. She unfastened it while she was speaking, and then employed her leisure in settling it to her satis-

faction. It was an aggravating piece of apparel to Basil's wife, for somehow it placed her at a disadvantage in the *tête-à-tête*.

"You will allow me to remain here—till—he is either better or worse," she said.

"Assuredly. Did I not write, requesting you to do so?"

"And when he gets well, you will tell him about that letter, and——"

"No, I cannot do that. I will not meddle in your affairs any more. I will never place myself again in such a position that I can be accused of making love to any woman's husband. Besides, you will tell him a much better story than I could."

"Surely you believe me when I say it was all my own doing."

"My knowledge of your skill in letter-writing is so great that I feel no difficulty in crediting your singular statement. The fact is," proceeded Mrs. Stondon, suddenly changing her tone, "you have placed yourself in a most diffi-

cult position with a man whom it is well-nigh impossible to persuade, and you must try to get out of this scrape for yourself. There is time enough, however, for you to think over the matter, for there is no possibility of any immediate change ; and even when he does get better, you must not harass him with your confessions till he is strong enough to bear them."

"And if he speaks to you on the subject——"

"I shall tell him what I think—that a woman who could act as you have done is only fit for Bedlam. And now," added Phemie, "had you not better go to your own room for a little while and rest after your journey? I will send Marshall to you in case you require anything."

"Do not send her. I require nothing—except——"

"What?" asked Phemie, icily.

"Your forgiveness and your friendship."

"Nonsense!" returned Mrs. Stondon. "You want neither one nor the other, Georgina."

There is no use in trying to impose upon me. When you can wipe out the memory of the words you have spoken this day, you will then perhaps be able to persuade me you value the friendship or affection of any woman, but not till then. Nay, do not go on your knees to me—it is perfectly unnecessary and extremely ridiculous. Pray get up,” she entreated; “some of the servants may come in, or my uncle, and it does look so excessively absurd. Pray get up;” and almost by force Phemie raised her visitor from the floor, and went with her to her room, and left her in an easy-chair with—to quote Mrs. Stondon—“an embroidered handkerchief smelling of millefleurs held to her face, and an evident inclination to weep abundantly.”

“I told her it would be the very best way possible for her to employ her time,” said Mrs. Stondon to her uncle, as they stood together in the dining-room. “Of course, she thinks me a hard-hearted Goth; but I mean to teach Mrs. Basil Stondon that she shall not be insolent to

me with impunity, and that I will not endure such speeches as she has made to-day patiently from anyone on earth."

"Phemie, Phemie, the woman is in great trouble."

"She has brought it on herself."

"Does that make it any easier to bear?" asked Mr. Aggland.

"And after all I did for her," went on Mrs. Stondon.

"You ought to forget your own good deeds, dear."

"Uncle, you are unreasonable—you expect me to be more than human; you think I should bear—bear—and never give back an answer—that I should endure to be put upon, and trampled under foot, and made use of, by anyone who likes to come and say, 'I have need of you.'"

"Because, Phemie, it may be that they only come as messengers—that it is really God who has need of you. My child, did you not once say you would try to do whatever work He gave you?

And is not endurance oftentimes as much His work as leading armies or commanding fleets? Be patient with this poor wayward soul, who goes wandering on, making herself and other people wretched—unknowing how to compass what she wants. Remember that charity not only ‘suffereth long and is kind,’ but that it ‘is not easily provoked; that it beareth all things; hopeth all things; endureth all things.’”

“I am no saint,” she said, a little sullenly; for Georgina had “put her out” thoroughly—had chafed and angered and hurt her.

“Did anybody ever think you were, Phemie?” he asked; and the *naïve* question made her laugh a little. “I am positive I never did,” he continued; “but I tell you what I do think, Phemie—that you ought to stand far above such petty annoyance. If you cannot bear indignity patiently, who can? If you will not be generous, where shall I turn and seek for magnanimity?—

‘It behoves the high,
For their own sake, to do things worthily.’

You ought to follow Coleridge's advice, and

'Gently take that which ungently came,
And without scorn forgive.'

And further,—

'If a foe have kenn'd,
Or worse than foe, an alienated friend,
A rib of dry rot in thy ship's stout side,
Think it God's message, and in humble pride
With heart of oak replace it.'

I will not quote any more of the lines, because I do not much approve the spirit of those that follow. My dear," he added, speaking very earnestly and very pathetically, "you have been mercifully dealt with: will you not deal mercifully by another?"

She bent her head till her brow touched the marble chimney-piece, but did not answer for a moment. Then—"You are not going to be hard and unforgiving, are you?" he said.

"No, uncle; I was only thinking," she replied—"thinking of a remark Georgina made."

"I should forget it at once," he recommended.

"It was nothing unpleasant—nothing disagree-

able," answered his niece. "She only said she often wondered what she would have been had she been brought up like me. She seems to imagine her education has made her what she is."

"Ay, poor thing, ay!" exclaimed Mr. Aggland, pityingly. He always felt very sorry for a woman who had been brought up, as he phrased it, "in the world," and was quite willing to be of Mrs. Basil Stondon's opinion.

"There is a reverse side to the question also," he said, continuing the idea; for education was a hobby it delighted him to ride. "Had you been brought up as she was, Phemie, how would it have fared with you?"

"Better perhaps, uncle," she replied; but he shook his head and declared she knew she was answering him idly, "for you must believe there is something in early training," he added, "something in the "bending of the twig"—something in hearing when very young of that which makes men,—

'Ply their daily task with busier feet,
Because their hearts some holy strain repeat.'

At the same time, however," finished Mr. Aggland, "I incline greatly to the opinion that he who said 'characters are nurtured best on life's tempestuous sea,' was right also; but this poor creature seems neither to have had one experience nor the other. You will be kind to her, Phemie. Remember, he may not live—think how soon she may be left a widow."

Mrs. Stondon did not require that last argument to induce her to return to her guest's room and beg for admittance; but it drained the only drop of bitterness which was left in her away, and softened her heart completely.

"I am very sorry for having been cross," she began, hesitatingly—"it was very wrong of me, and——"

Georgina never let her proceed further in her apology. She threw her arms round Phemie's neck, and kissed her over and over again.

"It was my fault," she said, "all my fault; but

I have been so miserable, and so jealous of you ; after what has passed, perhaps you will not believe me if I say I am grateful, but if he only recovers, and we come together once more, I will try to show you—I will try to do better than I have done. I wish I had never done you any harm, I do. I wish I could live my life over again and be honest and straightforward. If we could only see things at the beginning as we see them at the end—oh ! if we only could !”

From that day the two women became friends. Resolutely Phemie set herself to do what she could for Georgina, and the poor wife, whose home had been always such an unhappy one, grew different in the atmosphere of love and thoughtfulness.

“It is like being in heaven,” she said one day to Mr. Aggland. “I do not wonder at Basil hating me if this was the kind of life he had pictured to himself. What do they say about him now ?” she asked Phemie, who returned at the moment from speaking to the doctors.

"Only what you already know," answered Mrs. Stoddard—"that he is dangerously ill;" and Phemie turned away, for the crisis was drawing near.

CHAPTER XIII.

CONCLUSION.

THERE is nothing colder than a night-vigil ; be the curtains drawn never so closely, the fire piled never so high, there still comes an hour at the turn of the night when the cold steals inside the draperies, and takes up its position on the hearth alongside the watcher, seeming to say, " I have as good a right to the heat as you," and it absorbs the heat accordingly.

What is that shiver which tells us, spite of fires and closed doors, that the turn of the night has come ; that chill which creeps through the body, even in the summer time, if we are keeping our solitary watch by the sick-bed, or travelling hour after hour through the darkness ?

Some people say that the hour before dawn is the coldest, and this is possible; but it is not cold with the peculiar chilliness of which I am now speaking, and which produces precisely the same effect upon the nerves as the sudden withdrawal of pressure at the gas-works produces in a room.

In a moment the lights of the soul seem to burn dim, while that strange cold crosses the threshold and takes possession of the watcher's spirit.

None perhaps, save those who have habitually watched through the night, worked at a trade or a profession, or sat in attendance on the sick, will understand exactly what I am trying to write about, and yet the effects of this atmospheric change must have been felt some time or other by all men and all women to whose fate it has fallen ever to keep a solitary vigil, or to walk alone at night either through London or the country, or beside the desolate sea-shore.

It is at that hour they come fully to comprehend why intramural burials are so pernicious—it is then the sewers give forth their effluvia,

and the scent of flowers grows heavy and oppressive—it is then we close the window to keep the smell of the seringa from entering our chamber, and cast away the lilies that seemed once so sweet—then we take desponding views of sickness and of the future, and shrink alike from the work of this world, and the rest of the unseen!

Through the night, Mr. Aggland and Phemie and the nurse watched Basil Stondon, and when the hour to which I have referred came, Phemie arose, and, wrapping her shawl more closely round her, moved to the side of the sleeper and took up her position there.

As she did so, the lights in her heart were burning dim. She feared the worst—she believed he would not recover, and that the end was very near. She had persuaded Georgina to lie down, promising to call her should there be any decided change for the worse. The nurse was dozing on a sofa behind the door; Mr. Aggland, seated by the fire, was reading Jeremy Taylor's sermon concerning the "Foolish Ex-

change;" and there was a great stillness in the room as well as that peculiar cold, while Phemie softly drew a chair to the bedside in order to watch the sleeper more closely.

Eighteen years, or thereabouts, have elapsed since first in the church at Tordale, when the summer sun was shining on the earth, you, reader, were introduced to Phemie Keller. Should you care in that which is the darkest and coldest hour of all the night to gaze upon her again?

Those authors who, commencing with heroines of eighteen, take leave of them when they quit the church-door at twenty, have a great advantage over the other members of their craft who are compelled to talk of women when they have passed the Rubicon of female attractiveness.

Youth is so pretty, so fresh, so engaging, so full of poetry and romance and gaiety! And once youth is gone, when there are lines on the brow, and memories in the heart, and graves in the past, how shall the interest of the story

be kept up—the reader led on to follow the path of maid, or wife, or widow into middle age?

Still, as lives are lived after twenty, so the tale of those lives must be told; and, although eighteen years have gone, Phemie's beauty has not quite departed with them—it is not a thing of the past to this present day.

She wears her widow's cap, and the glory of auburn hair still remains thick and glossy, sunshiny and wonderful, as of old. It may not be the young hair that first attracted Captain Stondon, but it is a woman's hair for all that—soft, luxuriant, beautiful as ever.

What more, you ask, what more? Oh! friends, we cannot both eat our cake and have it. We may not go through the years, and enjoy them, we may live through the years, and learn experience out of them, and remain just as we were at the beginning.

How would you wish it to be? We came upon her first a girl—a farmer's adopted daughter—dressed

in a large-patterned, faded gown—in a coarse straw bonnet—unacquainted with the usages of society—a child of the hills, who had her dreams of fortune, and admiration, and love, nevertheless, just like your daughters, sir, and yours, and yours.

Once again you look upon her, but draw back, declaring this cannot be Phemie Keller! And yet the change which seems so wonderful to you has come gradually upon her, and it is the past which seems to her incredible, rather than the present.

A self-possessed and still beautiful woman—a saint rather than a Hebe—with lilies abiding in her pure face rather than roses—with features regular and perfect as of old.

Should you not like that face to be near you when you lie dying? I should. It gives the idea of all passion, all envy, all jealousy, all uncharitableness, having been taken out of it by the grace of God.

She still wears black. Till she is laid in her

coffin, I do not think Phemie will ever cease to do so ; but black, as Duncan Aggland somewhat cynically remarked, is becoming to her, and few people would wish to see Mrs. Stondon differently attired.

As for the rest, she has, as she had ever, lovely hands, and a stately figure, and a gracious presence ; somewhat thin she may be, somewhat too slight for her height ; but yet her admirers dispute this fact, and declare Mrs. Stondon to be perfection.

This shall be as you please, reader ; for those who love Phemie best, affirm it is not for her outward beauty, they delight in this woman, whose story is almost told ; but rather because there is that in her which they can trust and honour, which they have searched for elsewhere in vain.

She has come forth from the fire purified, and the face which looks on Basil Stondon is the face of one who, having passed through deep waters, has found rest for her soul at last.

Yet her thoughts were not happy as she sate by the bed gazing on the sleeper.

She sate thinking about him, and about men like him. She marvelled how the world would go on, if all in it were as weak, as helpless, as vacillating as he. She wondered, if he recovered, how it would be with him and Georgina. And she could not help going on to speculate what her lot might have proved had it been cast with such a husband, instead of with the true, good man who had stood between her and the world—who had loved her better than himself—who had remembered her in the hour of his bitterest agony,—and who had left her with his wealth no restriction save to make herself happy if she could.

People think about strange things when they watch by sick-beds. It is not always the malady which absorbs them—not always the end they sit considering; rather, oftentimes, they speculate about the patient, wondering concerning him and life, and his allotted part in the great drama

—how far his existence has been useful—how far, according to their light, the world would have been better or worse had such an one never existed.

Very vaguely Phemie recalled the years of Basil's life since he and she met, and marvelled whether his future, if he were spared, would be as purposeless as his past had been.

There lay a great sorrow at her heart—a sorrow too deep for tears—as she looked on the face of the man she had loved so long and so intensely. Sleep always is a wonderful state to contemplate—except in the case of a child. The man's troubles are forgotten—his schemes laid aside—his thoughts are far away from the concerns of his every-day life ;—and his body shares in the great change likewise—the keen eyes are closed—the windows of the brain are closely shaded—the lips open to utter no biting sarcasm—no ready excuse—no words of censure—no sentence of explanation ;—the features remain quiet—the over-wrought nerves are still.

Never a movement is there, either in the restless fingers or in the hands, that are so seldom unemployed. Almost feigning death, the sleeper remains so quiet that the watcher longs to wake him—to bring him back from himself and rest, to his fellows and the rush and bustle and hurry of life.

Time after time Phemie rose and bent over the sick man, to assure herself he was still breathing. Softly as the summer wind touches the leaves, she laid her fingers on his wrist, to feel if the pulse were still beating; till, at length satisfied there was no cause for immediate apprehension, she leaned back in her chair and waited—waited, for whatever might be the result.

He had aged more than she. There were deeper lines on his face than on hers—thin and white were his cheeks—worn and wasted his body—his hair was all tangled—his beard and moustache untrimmed. Basil, the young strong man, was gone, and there lay there in his stead



another Basil to him who had walked with her among the heather and across the fells.

The night wore on, and through the closed blinds dawn peeped with grey eyes into the sick-chamber; then, in due time, the sun began to rise, and Phemie turned wearily to greet his beams.

How would it be in that room when the sun set? Would she then have looked her last on Basil Stondon living. Should she thenceforth have to think of him as dead?

She crossed the room and, putting the curtains aside, looked out. It was a lovely morning in the early spring, and the birds were singing their fiercest—piping fit to burst their little throats for joy that it was daylight once again. All the east towards which she gazed was glorious with colour, and the distant sea lay like a lake reflecting back the sky.

Sadly, and with a gesture of utter weariness, Mrs. Stondon dropped the curtains and returned to her post. Her eyes were dazzled with the

bright sunlight, and for the moment she could not see that Basil was awake and looking at her.

"Phemie," he said; and then she knew he was saved. And while the sun rose higher and higher in the heavens—while the songs of the birds grew louder and more frantic—while the sea rolled gently in upon the shore—while every tree, and leaf, and shrub, and flower looked bright and glad in the light of morning—a great cry of exceeding joy ascended to the Throne of God; for the man was left to make a better thing of his life—to be a spendthrift of his time and a waster of his happiness, a faithless steward and a thankless unprofitable servant, never more.

She did not let him see his wife for a time. The illness had been too sharp to allow of sudden surprises—of much conversation during convalescence; but, as the days passed by, Phemie talked to him about his wife—about their unhappy disagreements—and openly and

without reserve, as though she had been speaking of some other person, about herself.

Not without tears did she speak of that past Eden in which they had eaten of the fruit which brings forth death. Not unmoved did she talk of her own shortcomings—of her own repentance. From the old text she preached the sermon of their lives but as no good sermon ends without holding out some hope for him who turns from the evil of his ways, and seeks even at the eleventh hour to cleave to the right—so Phemie, having faith that every word she spoke was true, assured Basil it was certain he might yet know happiness, and come in time to think of the story I have told but as a trouble that had been borne—as sorrow which had been endured.

She made him comprehend, after much difficulty, how faulty he had been in his conduct towards his wife. Never did she weary of repeating to him her belief that it was in his own power to make or to mar the peace of every future hour.

"You have never understood each other—you have never tried to comprehend her—you have never allowed her to understand you; but now, as you must travel through your lives together, do try to travel peaceably."

"And your future, Phemie," he asked—"what of that?"

"It shall be happy, too," she answered. "We do not look for a land without shadows when the noontime is over; but the land on which the evening light is shining may be very beautiful for all that."

And she laid her hand in his which he stretched out towards her; and the man and the woman who had loved one another so much when their high noon of life threw no shadow, looked steadfastly at one another, and discoursed silently, he to her, she to him.

In that hour, heart told to heart all it had suffered—all it felt strong enough to do. Without a word being spoken, each knew what was passing through the other's mind; and as their



fingers locked together and then were withdrawn, Phemie comprehended that Basil had sworn to God he would strive in the future to make atonement for the past.

As he might have gripped a man's hand in order to confirm a promise, to render verbal assurance unnecessary, Basil grasped with thin fingers the soft, small white hand, which she put in his.

And thus they buried the old love for ever ; and so Basil returned from the darkness of the valley of death—death physical and mental—to take his place in the world, and to fulfil the duties which his wealth and his station entailed upon him.

As for Phemie, what more is there to tell, save that she is now a happy, and a contented, and a useful woman ; still beautiful, and still a widow.

Suitors come to her, suitors such as she dreamed of when she built castles in the air among the Cumberland hills, but Phemie's answer to one and all is—No.

If she could live her life over again with her



present experience; if she could retrace the old road with a knowledge of its snares and its pitfalls, she would choose a second time as she chose the first, and take for her husband the man to whom she would strive to be a faithful and loving wife—the man who in the first chapter of this story, after toiling under the noontide heat, came suddenly within view of Tordale church, and who beside Strammer Tarn, amid the purple heather, within sound of the plashing waterfall, where ivy and lichens covered the face of the rocks, and ferns and foxglove grew between the stones, and the stream laved the mosses and the tender blades of grass, wooed and won, young, vain, fanciful, blue-eyed, auburn-haired Phemie Keller.

THE END.





